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A ROSE OF HINDUSTAN

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A ROSE OF HINDUSTAN

A Romance of the Time of Akbar,
the Moghul Emperor

by

MAJOR S. E. G. PONDER



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MAIN CHARACTERS IN THIS WORK

LAMIA . . .	<i>A young Hindu girl. (The A's in the name are Hard.)</i>
AMEYRA . . .	<i>Lamia's mother. A woman of wealth.</i>
THE EASTERN PRIEST .	<i>A Buddhist from the now deserted city of Angkor in Canbodia.</i>
THE MAHARAJAH . . .	<i>Ruler of the State of Rajilal.</i>
THE DIWAN	<i>His Prime Minister.</i>
PAPEETA	<i>Lamia's maid.</i>
THE RANEE JADONJI . . .	<i>The Maharajah's aged mother.</i>
RAO CHANDRA . . .	<i>Prince of the State of Ajanta and brother-in-law of the Maharajah.</i>
THE EMPEROR AKBAR .	<i>Son of Humayan and grandson of Baber.</i>
NAQUIB KHAN . . .	<i>A learned gentleman at Akbar's court.</i>
HAMIDA	<i>Akbar's mother.</i>

A ROSE OF HINDUSTAN

CHAPTER I

IN the days when the great Moghul emperors were still reigning in Delhi and Agra, Ameyra lived on the outskirts of the flourishing city of Ombra in Central India. Her house of three storeys was a fine one, in the spacious courtyard of which was a garden where roses rioted and flowers grew and flourished, and scented shrubs perfumed the air. There were deep verandahs, shady and cool even in the heat of high summer, and flat roofs of varying heights overlooked a wide, lazy-flowing river a hundred yards distant. The floors of the main rooms were of tightly set slabs of white marble, and the high walls built of finely dressed sandstone, gracefully carved and the delicate colour of old rose. There were baths let into the ground floors and heating for winter, when hot air from a central furnace drifted along gutters beneath the marble. The retainers were numerous, and the furnishings luxurious, as befitted the wealth and position of one of Ombra's most prominent citizens.

The sun was sinking in a flurry of scarlet, crimson, and golden cloudlets as Ameyra sat on the roof of her house in a swinging chair fashioned from skilfully woven cords slung on a lacquered framework. The air was soft to the skin as the finest silk, and a faint breeze fingered the calm waters of the now amber river, and with it came a mephitic breath from the teeming city close behind the house. A delicate nose might have distinguished the smell of spices, dry fertile earth, and pungent wood smoke in the strange conglomeration: Ameyra, however, was used to it and her thoughts dwelt on more important things than mere odours.

Idly she watched small flights of shrieking green parrots hurtling across the water to their roosts in the trees on the far banks of the river; her glance swept the fishing birds, standing motionless on low sandbanks, and passed beyond them to the smoke of cooking fires rising slowly into the gilded air from houses hidden by large trees. Lying back in her chair she absorbed some of the restful calm which lay over a tired, sun-drenched earth, relaxing after the day's activities.

Ameyra was no longer young, and her beauty was passing, but she had sunk gracefully into the late thirties. Her pale, oval face the colour of old ivory, with its patina of health glowing like that of a ripening peach, was thoughtful. Beneath the thin black line of plucked eyebrows her large eyes tinted with antimony, clearly showed strength of character. Her small, well formed mouth, which could harden into a grim line, had by the spoken word twisted the cords of many hearts, but now it was spread in a soft

smile forming a dimple in her right cheek which men had compared to a navel of the gods, a sunken pearl, and an exciter of passion.

This woman was of the oldest profession, which in the East is not regarded as dishonourable, and had known many men, and her clever little hands, with their delicately hennaed palms, had held countless hearts, and in doing so garnered priceless jewellery, great wealth, and much knowledge.

"Men. What are men?" she would enquire when the mood was upon her. "They are but rowdy boys, ever vain and lustful and as easy to lead as a camel by its nose peg, if a woman have but a tiny handful of brains." Then again: "I. What am I? I am as I am. I do not ask for favours, I demand them."

When at the height of her fame, Ameyra had married with much pomp and splendour the great Delhi gateway leading out of Omra City towards the turbulent North. It was in every way a suitable husband, never being jealous, and always majestic and imposing. A year before this story begins, however, and after a chance remark passed by one of her visitors, she decided it was time that she had a child. The man she picked to be its father was of good birth, young, and handsome, and one of her most devoted admirers. He never knew this; and when the girl, for whom she had prayed often to the gods, was born, he was as intrigued and amused as were many others who came to the house.

Thirty-nine days had past since the birth and the time for the child's naming was due, and now Ameyra swung gently in the chair holding the baby in her arms while awaiting the coming of a priest for whom she had sent. He would read the child's future, and give the all-important and auspicious birth name on which she had been unable to come to a decision.

Ameyra paid homage to the gods and was charitable to their priests and the poor. In the western ward of the city was a large Jain temple, and it was for one of its elders that she waited. Her profession being without undue shame or stigma, priests of many creeds, castes, and countries, came to call when staying in the city during their wanderings up and down the land. Jains, Brahmins, Yogis, Lamas, Buddhists, and even faquirs of low standing, drifted into the courtyard and they were rarely refused an audience and lavish hospitality by the owner. Conversation would then turn on life and death, love and hate, princes and paupers, sinners and saints, but best of all Ameyra loved to listen to a pair of ancients splitting some metaphysical hair when she would now and again add some provocative remark as one throws fresh twigs on to a fire.

When her personal maid and housekeeper, Ermi, came up the steps from a room below the roof the Jain priest was with her.

"He has come," she called excitedly, hurrying across to her mistress. "Three Sons of Pleasure would have paid their respects. All I sent away saying you were busy on matters of importance.

Ameyra nodded her approval as she got up from her chair to greet the priest, an honour she afforded to few. Regal in her tight-fitting bodice and full skirt of plum-coloured, flowered silk with a cream sari draped over her head and shoulders, she was in sharp contrast to the Jain who was very old and as thin as a starved cow. Naked except for an ample, scarlet loin-cloth and a yellow cotton shawl across his shoulders, on his forehead blazed a blood-red caste mark, while his hands were almost claws, and his legs thin as reeds, but in his deep-set dark eyes were intelligence and shrewdness.

"This house is honoured a thousand times," said Ameyra politely. "I have awaited your coming with impatience."

"It is nothing, my daughter," replied the priest in a voice astonishingly deep for so meagre a frame. "Be seated and I will see if the veil can be lifted so that we may peer down the vista of your child's future."

Ameyra sat down again, while the Jain squatted with crossed legs before her on the beaten mud of the roof. The maid, being a privileged retainer, also sat down nearby with an anxious look on her withered features. The man now took off his shawl, and feeling in his loin-cloth produced a small leather bag from which he took out two twigs, one longer than the other, a handful of black sand, and a thin piece of curiously woven cord. Both women watched him with absorbed interest.

The light was almost gone and on the still air was a silence pregnant with high expectation. Leaning forward the Jain asked to be allowed to hold the child, and Ameyra handed down to him the soft bundle out of which protruded a tiny golden face with large black eyes that stared up unwinkingly into the aged face.

"It is a man child?"

"No, a girl, for whom I earnestly prayed."

The man nodded gravely as he laid the infant between his legs and picked up the piece of cord, which was three inches long and a dark brown in colour. One end was now dangled just above the baby's face and for a few moments it hung motionless before starting to turn and twist as if it were a snake held by the tail. Backwards and forwards it wriggled and Ameyra's eyes grew round with wonder as she watched. It soon became obvious that the motions of the cord were now of a definite nature, because it swung from the perpendicular half left back to the straight, and then half right, making a 'V' formation; it swung, however, further to the right than to the left. The Jain watched the cord for a few moments and then putting it down he handed the child back to its mother. Picking up the two twigs he threw them with apparent carelessness on to the floor before him, and then, after studying their position intently, took them up again and together with the cord replaced them in the leather bag. He now turned to the sand which lay in a small pile and smoothed it out with an index finger. Bending forward he blew gently upon it and the grains moved to and fro,

finally settling down into a pattern at which the priest gazed for a long time.

Holding the child tightly to her breast, Ameyra stared out across the darkening river into a clear sky where the stars were leaping into view. Her face showed no sign of anxiety, but the maid wriggled, and her sunken lips moved in and out over toothless gums. The silence was now and again broken by occasional murmurings from the city, the bark of a dog, or the shout of a man.

The Jain at last straightened himself, swept up the sand into the bag, and lifted his grey head. He began to speak in a low, even, expressionless voice as if in a trance, but in his eyes, fixed on the face of the woman before him, was a light that belied the fact.

"As is the manner of such things, much is made clear and much is blurred like reflection on water stirred by breezes. This child has twin destinies. Both are broad, but one dwindles for a period until it becomes thinner than the spider's thread. Men will desire and die because of her, and her charm shall be such that princes covet her. That is sure. Great wealth and bitter sorrow lie along one path, but the other leads to one man and one man alone. He can make her a queen and she would bear sons destined to greatness. Her feet should wander gaily down the years, but, my daughter, let her beware of the path that grows thin; one step amiss and death awaits her while she is still young."

"You speak in riddles, priest," exclaimed Ameyra. "Which path leads to the throne?"

"The gods reveal much, but not all. That which you would know is denied to us. You, who bore this child, must choose the path. It is as if twin pomegranates hung from a tree; both appear desirable, but one is rotten at the core.

"O Favoured of the Gods, you have led many men along the path of your own desires, but it is written clearly, and beyond all doubt, that you alone shall make the choice. Guard well your tongue, my daughter, for therein lies a mortal danger. In the years to come do not forget this warning."

Ameyra was gravely disappointed, and a petulant drooping at the corners of her mouth showed it.

"Will she have great beauty?" she enquired sharply.

"Assuredly. Beauty to blind men's eyes and cause them to be eaten up by the fires of passion."

Somewhat mollified, the woman leaned back in her chair.

"What shall the child be named? The matter has given me much cause for consideration, and to-morrow is the fortieth day from birth."

"It is written in the sand that she shall be named Lamia,"* replied the Jain slowing heaving himself to his feet.

"Lamia, such a name is unknown to me. What does it signify?"

* The 'a's' are hard in this name.

"It means, 'She who walks skilfully.' Perhaps this is yet another warning from the gods. Those who walk over men's hearts should tread daintily so that they do not trip. I will now depart. There remains one thing more, but do not ask its meaning because it is not known to me."

"What is it," cried Ameyra eagerly as she got up from her chair.

"Take your daughter when she reaches the age of five into the jungle. Sit quietly beneath the trees so that she may see the monkey people on their branches and so learn from them."

"For shame, priest," cried Ermi, outraged at this suggestion, and unable to restrain her indignation. "What has this child, this gift from the gods, to do with self-scratchers and eaters of filth and worms? You have lost your senses and do but babble."

"Peace, woman," ordered the Jain severely. "Do not speak so to one who is a servant of the gods. I read what is written." He turned to Ameyra. "A blessing on this house. In seven days I will return before going to Hardwar, where I shall live out my allotted span of years in that holy place."

The priest went away accompanied by the scowling Ermi, who muttered ominously as she led him down into the courtyard. Ameyra, disturbed and out of humour, lingered for a short time on the roof and then went to her favourite room on the first floor where she handed the child over to its ayah. The room, into which only her personal friends were invited, was beautiful and unusual, with three graceful, arched windows which looked down on to the garden in the courtyard. The central window was open, but those on either side of it were filled with pierced white marble, as delicate and intricate as fine lace. The floor was of milk-marble and on it were many rugs whose deep colourings glowed like gems. Against the walls were three low divans covered with rose and gold Persian brocades and piled high with plump silken cushions. From the vaulted roof hung three silver lamps, one of which had come from the palace at Agra. Low tables were set on the rugs and in one corner was Ameyra's priceless water pipe with its mouthpiece of amber, gold and jasper.

It was, however, the walls of this long, rectangular room which were a marvel to all who beheld them, their fame having spread as far North as Imperial Delhi. Lined with fifty-four panels of unstained teak, each was elaborately carved in deep relief. Dragons, birds, trees, and strange exotic beasts and flowers rioted together and much had been overlaid with gold and silver, and bright enamels, and numerous semi-precious stones were inset. The work had been done by a mysterious Taoist priest who had wandered into the city and had been given lodging in Ameyra's house.

This strange, yellow man, with a flat face and slanting eyes, who had excited the wildest interest in all who met him, had never revealed who he was, and what he was doing so far from his own country. He had talked often and long with his hostess telling her wondrous tales

of distant China, of its culture, its art, and its continual search after serene happiness. One day he was sitting on the edge of a small fish pond in the courtyard garden when Ameyra approached.

"Because this house has much graciousness and calm content, and I am weary with much wandering, I would linger here a while," he said smiling, one long-fingered hand trailing in the water.

"Remain fifty years," replied his hostess instantly. "This house is thrice blessed by your presence."

The man had thanked her in flowery language and then suggested that, as he was not unskilled in woodwork, he should decorate one of her rooms with the art of his own country. Ameyra was enchanted by the idea, and so for six and a quarter years he had laboured, and she had counted the cost of materials well spent. When the work was done the Taoist had gone away as suddenly and as mysteriously as he had come.

Summoning a servant to light the lamps, Ameyra threw off her sari, and after the woman had gone she lay down at full length on one of the divans. Her small fists were clenched and her mouth compressed as she lay with arms above her head gazing up into the high shadows.

A curse on all priests. Why could the man have not spoken clearly? Not for an instant did she doubt that he had given the absolute truth, but what had he meant by the warning to guard her tongue? By long and bitter experience she had learned to be discreet and tactful in her dealings with men, and knowing this she felt more than a little aggrieved. She must guard it against whom, and when? And then there was that last and unpleasantly cryptic utterance. What had she, or her daughter, to do with apes? Although sacred, she loathed them; the thieving, evil-smelling creatures that they were.

Without warning her mood changed, and leaving the divan she started to pace up and down the room. He had said her child might be a queen and have great beauty. What else mattered? On this she would concentrate and would now go and pray to the gods for guidance in the chapel of the outer garden.

Hurrying from the room she went down into the courtyard and the warm, scented night. Overhead the sky was a purple veil luminous with stars as she paused before a tall flower-pot in which grew the sacred tulasi plant. Breaking off a leaf she crushed it between her fingers so that the pungent scent should waft up a short, silent prayer to the ever-listening gods.

A wooden door swung open as she passed out of the courtyard into the chapel garden which lay towards the river. Here, between high walls, were more plants and flowers and paths, and also a square, shallow bathing pool for use in warm weather. The chapel was a small, square room over which hung the branches of an aged pipal tree. In the dim interior, amid an ever-present smell of stale incense, rancid butter, and faded flowers, an image of the god Krishna stood on a stone altar. Before it were laid fading marigold flowers,

a little fruit, and a bowl of milk. To one side on the altar a tiny oil lamp flickered and near it was a lump of sacred Ganges mud into which Ameyra now stuck a piece of lighted incense. Taking up a single marigold flower she sat down before the god, and placing the flower on her head she crossed her arms. With closed eyes she prayed.

"Come to me. Come to the right; to the left; to all sides of me, O Ganesh! O Shiva! O Lakshmi Devi! and assist me in my worship and meditation. O Krishna! O Mighty and All Powerful! Guide my deeds. Endow me with wisdom. I am your slave. Dust at your feet. Most unworthy, most debased.

"Regard my daughter, Lamia, with favour. Guide, O Krishna, the stars in their courses that misfortune, calamity, and all evil may pass her by. I am her sacrifice; I am her price. If evil there must be on my head, let it rest."

Ameyra then meditated in the warm, odorous gloom. Outside the partly open door a sudden breeze stirred the leaves of the pipal tree, and their whisperings might have been a faint echo of the voices of the gods.

On leaving the chapel, Ameyra was strangely elated and had come to a decision. She must accept the penalty of Hell as laid down in the Shastras, where it was ordained that if the girl were married between the ages of three and five the parents after death would go to a first-class heaven; if married between five and eight then to a second-class heaven; and between eight and ten then to a third-class. After that age the parents would certainly be sent to Hell. If her daughter were to become a queen then marriage according to the usual custom was unthinkable, and she her mother, would have to train the child to catch the eye of some worthy prince to be sought out in due course.

The following morning all the household knew from Ermi what had been said by the priest. In the servants' quarters, and in the kitchens and store houses, cooks, hinds, water carriers, sweepers, gardeners, and serving maids, discussed the exciting news from many angles. There were arguments, quarrels, and hot abuse as each person put forward his or her own interpretation of the priest's cryptic utterances. One aged dame squatting in a corner of the inner courtyard, among the wandering hens, was so old and shrivelled that she might have been mistaken for a child. She lifted a bony, claw-like hand from beneath her black cotton shawl and shook it at Ermi who was standing nearby, and her black eyes shone malevolently.

"Woe! Calamity!" she cried shrilly. "What do you know of such high matters, Ermi? Woe, I say. The child has twin destinies. It were better had she never been born. She will surely fade away in youth like a plucked lily."

Ermi swung round on the old woman, her face distorted by outraged indignation.

"O Mother of Ill Omen! O Daughter of Misery!" she shrieked.

"You are entirely without sense or worth. The child is blest beyond all others. Close your evil lips, or I will beat you as you well deserve, although you are aged. If our gracious mistress heard you she would fling you out into the streets where you belong. It is only because her heart is softer than a ripe melon that she feeds and cherishes uselessnesses such as you."

Those standing by voiced their agreement with these sentiments, and the ancient shrank back into her shawl muttering rebelliously to herself. Ermi now turned to the other servants and drove them off to their various duties.

"Cease your chattering and to work," she ordered.

Reluctantly they obeyed her and the morning's routine went forward again and the ripples of excitement died away.

CHAPTER II

SHORTLY after her daughter's third birthday, on a hot evening in early summer, Ameyra was entertaining a young nobleman from a nearby state. Reclining on one of the divans in the panelled reception room she fanned herself with a large and beautiful fan made from kingfishers' feathers. Squatting crossed legged on a huge, plump cushion at her feet, Ratan Singhi sipped a heady, amber wine from a golden tumbler and looked up at his hostess with dark, shining eyes.

"What now passes in the Rose of Delhi's mind?" he asked after a prolonged pause in their conversation.

"The heat of this summer daily grows worse, and our parched earth cries out for relief," replied Ameyra sighing.

"It is so with us also," said the Rajput, nodding gravely as he fingered his thin line of drooping moustache. "It is almost too hot, even for love."

"Yes, and I tire easily in these days." The woman sighed again. "You gay flatterers who visit me often forget that I am a mother and no longer young."

"Such talk is utterly without sense," cried the young man vigorously. "You are as youthful as a new moon and as entrancing. Have I not come many *kos* to refresh myself at the spring of your enchanting presence?"

"Well said. Such compliments are as sweet music to me," said Ameyra, laughing. "To-day, however, there shall be no love-making because I am weary and would hear from you what lies behind the diverting story which buzzes about our bazaars like flies over meat. Tell me what your Prince of Bundi has been doing. The Emperor Akbar, although but a boy, is not to be treated lightly, and yet it seems the prince defied him."

"The story is one worthy of our race," replied Rattan Singhi, grinning. "We Rajputs are as tigers, and our lord is indeed a mighty one. The deed shall live long after we are ashes. How runs the story in your bazaars?"

"No, I would reach the kernel of the matter, my friend. Bazaar rumours are distorted as reflections upon water. Tell me what took place at the court."

Ratan Singhi grinned again and told the story which was then a main topic of conversation in all the great bazaars of Central India.

"As the Light in Darkness knows, Jodha Bai, the Empress died during the last moon. Because the Emperor was gravely afflicted by this thing he ordered all the court, and even our Rajput princes, to remove their beards and moustaches as a sign of great mourning. This edict was unwise and caused grave discontent among my people. We Rajputs are men and warriors, and he would have turned us into women and boys with smooth, hairless faces so that our wives would mock us."

"What did your prince do?" enquired Ameyra, knowing the fierce and proud spirit of the Rajputs. "The bazaars say that when the royal barbers came to your camp to do their work they were severely beaten."

"Indeed they were," replied Rattan Singhi with grim satisfaction. "They were also made to eat dirt and abuse, and were driven out with buffets."

"What then? Was not the Emperor wrathful?"

"Yes. Crying out in a great rage, he forgot his love for our prince and gave the order for him to be tied and the beard taken from his face by force. When the news reached our camp men unsheathed their swords and all were eaten up by fury and dismay. Word was then sent to the court that there would be bloodshed, whereupon the Emperor's rage lightened and sense returned. Mounting his elephant he went to our camp where he expressed admiration for the fighting spirit of our prince, who, being wiser than many Brahmins made a soft answer to the Emperor, saying that because he ate the flesh of the pig he was unworthy of putting his lips into mourning for the Empress."

Ameyra, much amused by this tactful answer, laughed gaily as she sat up on the divan.

"What was done with this most sagacious prince?"

"The Emperor Akbar made as if he were much gratified by this subtle answer, and embraced him, and took him on to the elephant, and they went to the palace at Agra," said Rattan Singhi proudly. "Our manhood remained and all were gratified beyond measure."

"It is a story worthy of your race," said Ameyra slowly and then spoke her thoughts aloud. "It is to them I will turn when the time comes."

When asked to explain what she meant by this remark she laughingly turned it aside and encouraged her guest to refill his

tumbler with wine. As he did so there came from the courtyard below a loud splash followed by a roar of childish lamentation. Ameyra left the divan in a flash, and running across to the left-hand window she leaned out of it as her guest joined her.

"Again she has done it, the little wickedness," she cried in exasperation. "She should be soundly slapped for her foolishness."

Rattan Singhi chuckled as he looked over his hostess' shoulder and watched the ayah dash on to the scene and pluck out a soaking, roaring Lamia from the shallow fish pond.

"O Calamity! O Pure Sinfulness!" cried the ayah, attempting to wring out the water from the child's garments. "A hundred times I have told you not to do this thing. Now your mother shall withhold the sweetmeats."

"I do not care, O Wicked Ayah," replied the child defiantly. "It is my desire to do this thing. I will do it!"

"Was there ever such a child?" shrieked the ayah furiously. "Without doubt you will come to a bad end and bring heavy sorrow on my aged head." She swept Lamia from the scene, and her mother moved back from the window.

"It is strange that my daughter is always attempting to walk upon the narrow marble rim of that pond," she said slowly. "Four times she has fallen, and she escapes from the ayah and does it yet again. Once she accomplished it without slipping and screamed with pleasure. I do not understand this thing."

"She treads a narrow path," remarked the Rajput. "She is destined for greatness."

"Aho! One other, a wise-man, once said similar words," said the woman as she went back to the divan and sat down upon it. "Without doubt this is a shadow from the future, but I would I could see that which casts it."

Rattan Singhi, amused and interested, would have questioned her further, but she skilfully changed the subject, which was too important and personal to be discussed with casual visitors. Soon afterwards she dismissed him and went up on to the roof and wandered restlessly to and fro, fanned by a faint breeze which, however, was hot and stale. Low down in the western sky lightning flickered evilly across the great battalions of copper-coloured clouds which had been gathering for some days and meant that the long-awaited rains were not far off. Overhead the sky was now a vast, black velvet blanket, threatening to descend and smother the already suffocating and withered countryside. The heat seemed no less intense to Ameyra than it had been at noon, and in addition to sapping her vitality, it numbed her brain as well, so that connected thought had become impossible.

Ameyra's gown of the finest and thinnest silk rustled musically to her slow movements, increasing to tiny crescendos of sound as she sat down wearily on the low balustrade of the roof. Panting slightly, she wiped her damp forehead with moist fingers and patted

her smooth black hair. Plucking out the problem of her daughter's future from a pocket deep in her brain, she considered it uneasily. When the aged Jain had departed for Hardwar three years previously she had decided to pay no active attention to the horoscope until such time as Lamia showed signs of developing character. These signs had become increasingly manifest during recent months and Ameyra knew that she must now face her problem directly and without delay. Action of some kind must be taken, but in what form? She herself had intellect, great wealth, and many influential friends, but how could these things be best used to bring her daughter to the steps of a throne? One thing, however, was quite certain in her mind, and it was that, when Lamia reached the first bloom of her youth at about fourteen years of age, she would have to be introduced to the court of some chosen ruler. It was this that had been in her thoughts when she had spoken aloud to Rattan Singhi. It was among the Rajput states that she must search for a prospective patron, this race being virile, and wealthy, and powerful, in spite of the fact that a Mahommedan ruler sat on the Imperial throne at Agra.

Her own prince, although a Hindu, was too old to be considered, and his younger sons cared more for hunting and games than for fair women. She examined the rulers of nearby states and discarded them all as being impossible for one reason or another. Her thoughts then wandered off in a fresh direction as she considered how the girl was to be introduced at the selected court. Should she be trained as a dancing girl, or should she be adopted by some influential member of the court? If the latter course were to be taken then it would become imperative that she, Ameyra, should give up her present mode of life and move into the state where she must live quietly until such time as her daughter was ready to be produced.

How difficult it all was, and what was the meaning of the priest's advice to take her daughter into the forest to watch the monkey people in the trees? Suddenly she gave up her meditation and got to her feet. She would wait until after the rains had broken; it was now too hot to think clearly, besides it made her head ache.

During the next two days the clouds in the western sky grew, expanding slowly into vast, corrugated, dun-coloured masses, which crept menacingly into the high heavens. The usual precautions, taken each year, were made in case the river should overflow and cut off the household from the city. Doorways leading out of the courtyards were built up, and steps placed in position, and the large, flat-bottomed boat was dragged out and repaired so that trips could be made if necessary to the bazaars for food and necessities.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon on the third day, and Ameyra was resting when Ermi came running into her room to tell her that the first drops of rain had fallen. Leaving her bed in haste, Ameyra went up to the roof to greet the coming storm. The sun had become obscured, and in a dismal, yellow twilight the

thirsty earth waited in silent, quivering expectation. This moment each year never failed to thrill her senses, throbbing in tune with the tension which held all living things in its grip.

Facing the West, she stood listening while a few bloated rain-drops hit the roof with fat, satisfying plops. Then she heard that for which she had been waiting. Beginning with a faint sighing, the sound of the advancing torrent grew steadily into a whispering, then a heavy rustling, and, finally, into a murmuring which rapidly developed into a slow roaring. Ameyra now fled down from the roof and as she reached the room beneath the rains broke and the sky dissolved into a streaming waterfall. It rained as if the flood-gates of some long pent up stream had been suddenly flung open, and continued without pausing for three days and nights.

On the third day, when the river, from a series of shallow pools between the sandbanks, had become a raging yellow torrent which overflowed its banks and was soon lapping hungrily at the walls of the house, the rain suddenly stopped and the sun blazed down from great rents in the clouds. Ameyra went up on to the roof and, in the steaming air, stood looking towards the vanished river as she wondered anxiously if the waters would continue to rise. The dirty yellow flood water surged turgidly past the walls and in it floated many strange things. Whole trees glided by and clinging to their branches were many small, half-drowned creatures. There were also the dead bodies of larger animals, portions of torn off roofs, and much debris of all kinds jumbled together in aimless confusion.

Watching the unusual scene, this being the worst flood of any that Ameyra could remember, she suddenly stiffened when a brightly-coloured and strange object drifted into view. Attached to a branch of a tree, which bobbed drunkenly and lazily, was what appeared to be a bright orange shawl. It drew nearer and she saw that a man's head and shoulders protruded from it. She acted promptly and it was only a matter of a few minutes before the boat was on its way to rescue the man who was clinging to the outer limbs of the branch.

When the limp and now unconscious man was brought into the inner courtyard and laid on a hastily fetched bedstead, Ameyra stood beside it and gazed down at the figure. The man was tall and thin, and his skin was paler and clearer than those of the district. His head was closely shaven and his well-formed features were intelligent and unlined like those of a young man, although he was obviously middle aged. Ermi, having heard the bustle and excitement caused by the rescue, came out and joined her mistress.

"Before all the gods, it is another priest!" she exclaimed, peering down at the sodden figure. "Priests are for ever finding their way to this house, but this is a good omen that one who serves the lordly ones should be saved."

Ameyra nodded thoughtfully.

"What you say is true, Ermi. It is in my mind that the gods

have sent this man to guide my actions, I being lost in a jungle of doubt."

"What actions, my mistress?"

"In regard to the child. Have you forgotten the horoscope? I am sorely perplexed and need guidance so that I do not pluck awry the Cords of Destiny." She half turned away. "Come, woman, have him taken to the second bathroom and we will restore his senses and put him to bed."

In the bathroom the two women first bathed and then massaged the unconscious man with warming and soothing oils. Towards the end of the operation the priest began to revive, and struggling into a sitting position stared at the two women in bewilderment. On seeing his nakedness he protested in a strange language and then smiled. Ameyra smiled in return and without speaking held a small bowl of warm liquid to his lips. The man drained the skilfully mixed drugs and almost at once sank back into a deep and refreshing sleep.

In the late evening, when he awoke, he was fed with dainties, and after he had cleared the dishes he turned over on his bed and went to sleep again. The next morning, having recovered from his unpleasant experience, he was sent for by Ameyra.

"How came you to be in such peril of your life?" she enquired, as the priest lowered himself on to a pile of cushions. "Had I not seen you from the roof of this house you would surely have been drowned."

"I should not have died because my time is not yet," answered the man smiling and using the Tamil language. "I am a priest and have gathered some knowledge since I left my own country."

"From where do you come and what is your creed?" Ameyra's voice was anxious. "I knew one other in the past who wore the orange shawl and he came from a country in the Far East, but his face was flat and his skin yellow."

"I also come from the East, and I am a Yogi, and a follower of Brahma, the four-faced."

"The gods be praised, you can aid me," cried Ameyra in rising excitement. "Tell me how you came to this land."

"I, who am no longer young, have wandered for many years," answered the man smiling again. "When still a young man I lived with my own people in a great city. It was a beautiful city, full of palaces and fine temples, and set deeply in the jungle. (He referred to the now deserted city of Angkor in Cambodia.) Without warning we were attacked by the little yellow people from the East who lived beyond the borders of our country. Being unprepared, and unwarlike, our city fell to them and many were slain. By hiding in the secret chambers beneath the great temple I escaped death and then fled into the jungle, and after crossing great rivers and mountains I found this land, from which my people came in the long dead past."

"Two moons ago it became known to me that I must meet a

holy one who lives in the great hills of the North. Because of this thing I left the fine city of Madura and came north. When the rains broke I slept in the house of a priest whose name is not known to me, and without warning the floods came and swept away the village. I can swim, and coming upon a great branch I laid myself upon it. Beyond that I have no knowledge." The man scratched the back of his shaven head on which the hair was beginning to grow again, and he coughed. "Although it was decreed that you should pluck me out of the waters, I am grateful, and thank you a thousand times, and in my mind are many beautiful and charming thoughts concerning you."

"A pretty speech, priest," said Ameyra pleasantly. "It was nothing. It would have been done for any man."

"Even so." The man nodded gravely as he sat with upturned palms resting between his knees. "It is, however, not seemly that such a debt should remain unpaid. Is there some manner in which I can repay? The matter must be swift, because the holy one in the North calls urgently and I must begone."

"It is in my mind to hope that, because you are a Yogi and have much wisdom, you will speak and guide my footsteps from straying down false paths," cried the woman eagerly.

"Tell me, and I will judge if I can call upon such wisdom as I possess."

Ameyra then told her companion much of herself and all concerning her child and its future. The priest listened attentively, occasionally asking a searching question. When she came to the end of her narrative he nodded slowly.

"How old is this child?" he enquired.

"She has three years and four moons."

"Good. Have her brought so that I may look upon her face."

When Lamia at last stood near the priest she gazed at him for a few moments with huge, sloe-black eyes, and then ran and threw herself into his arms with chortles of delight. Smiling, he caught up the child and placed her facing him between his crossed legs.

"How are you named?" he enquired gently.

"I am named Lamia," replied the child, her face crumpled with laughter.

"A pretty name. What is it's meaning?"

"That is not in my mind," said the child, suddenly grave and wriggling round to look at her mother.

"It means, 'She who walks skilfully' " answered Ameyra.

"The aged Jain gave it to her on the naming day."

"Good. Although a baby this child has already great charm. Doubtless the horoscope was true in all respects. I will now go up on to the roof and meditate, and returning will speak to you what forms in my mind." The man lifted up the child and set her on her feet as he got up from his cushion.

The priest was absent for so long that Ameyra grew impatient, and when at last he came into the room she was pacing slowly up and down, having sent Lamia away.

"You have found an answer?" she cried.

The priest nodded and shifted the yellow shawl more closely about his shoulders.

"I am no reader of the stars and so can but use such wisdom as lies within me," he said, as he stood before his hostess. "I have meditated upon what you have said to me and find that your child's future lies in her feet. Is she not named 'She who walks skilfully'? Did not the Jain say that she should watch the monkey people, who walk skilfully upon thin branches?"

"Ahi!" cried Ameyra, astonished that she had not seen this connection for herself. "That is indeed true speech. Continue."

"As I read it you shall train her as a dancing girl, so that she may ensnare some prince with her grace and beauty. In the South there are many who walk with great skill upon the taut, thin ropes, and all gaze upon them with amazement. In my own city, from which I fled, there were many dancing girls, and all were held in high honour. Some danced upon the rope, and one was my sister, from whom I learned something of the art. Because of this thing she sat with princes and was held in high esteem."

"All is now indeed made clear to me," cried Ameyra with great delight. "Without doubt you were sent by the gods in answer to my prayers. You will remain with this household and teach my child this art?"

The priest smiled and nodded.

"Thus shall the debt be paid. But first I must answer the call. Before the cold weather I will return to this house and we will talk further upon this matter. It is in my mind that I will rest here."

Many weeks later the man reappeared and at once became an honoured member of Ameyra's household.

As Lamia grew older the priest gradually took over her training and education, which included increasingly severe and prolonged physical training. She was also taught the graceful and new sitting dances of the Far East, in which the arms and hands play such an important part. She also became adept at walking on a tight-rope raised a few inches from the ground. Her mind was also not neglected, many teachers, travellers, and priests, being employed to teach her knowledge and much wisdom. As a result her intellectual abilities soon far outreached those of her mother, who, however, spent much time enlightening her daughter in the ways of men.

As the years slid by Lamia grew more and more beautiful. Her oval face, with its exquisitely chiselled nose and mouth, was the colour of old ivory, and under the satin skin was a patina of perfect health. Her slim figure and pristine grace was that of unspoiled womanhood, while her temperament was gay, and her vivid black eyes shone with laughter and the enjoyment of life. Her mother,

noting these things, marvelled and thanked the gods, but kept her child apart from the world.

Lamia, from her balcony high above the main courtyard, often watched the comings and goings of the visitors, and wondered why she was never permitted to meet them. One day, shortly after her twelfth birthday, she was walking with her mother in the outer temple garden when she broached this subject.

"O my mother, why do so many men come to this house? Long have I watched from my room. Many are young and handsome, and when I look upon them my heart flutters strangely. Never have I yet spoken with other than greybeards or priests."

Ameyra patted her smooth hair and regarded her daughter in silence for some moments.

"It is in my mind that you know why these men come to our house, my daughter," she said slowly.

"Yes, it is known to me."

"I am as I am, but you, my daughter, are born to greatness." Ameyra sighed deeply. "You are as a fine ruby, polished and prepared, and a jewel beyond price. Would you have me throw you to the 'all such' of Hindustan?"

Lamia's face showed some bewilderment.

"You speak in riddles. My mind is confused. Why am I born to greatness? Who was my father? I have long wished to know. Why have I not seen his face?"

The elder woman's face clouded for a moment.

"You have no father, Lamia. You are a child of the gods," she replied at last.

"How can this be?" asked the girl at once. "They have taught me of love, and life, and death. Indeed I am not unversed in these things, knowing that even the trees must mate before they bear fruit."

"Even so, my child, there are things beyond your understanding into which it is better to make no inquiry," replied Ameyra gravely. "With this you must rest content." She then told her child much of what the aged Jain priest had said at her naming.

"Who is this prince that shall make me a queen?" cried Lamia excitedly. "Where does he live? Is he young and handsome like those who come to this house?"

"That is not yet known, my child. Within the year the matter shall be made clear."

"Shall I dance before him and he will love me?" The girl's eyes danced with pleased anticipation.

"If the gods will it, but when I have set you on the path you must tread it alone," replied her mother, smiling. "Ask me no further bothersome questions, but remember he will never love you deeply if you are dull-witted. You have great beauty, and grace, and charm, but men are not held by these alone. It is also by skilful handling of their vanity, by pretty speeches, and suchlike,

that the silken cord of love becomes a heavy chain. Go back to your learning. I will talk on the matter with him from the East."

A few days later Ameyra sent for the priest and together they sat on the roof in the warm night.

"My friend, the time has come when I must bestir myself. The child is ready to meet her fate. We have prepared, between us, the threads of her destiny: alone she must weave the pattern."

"I have known this thing for three moons and did but wait for you to tell me," replied the man. "I also must depart."

"Never," cried Ameyra in dismay. "Without your guidance and wisdom I should become lost as a sick camel in a desert."

"Nevertheless I must go. The years I have spent in this gracious household have cured some sickness in my soul, but last night I dreamed a dream so clear it was indeed a vision."

"Tell me of it."

"I thought I lay on my couch and some great winged beast fell upon me and tore out my shivering soul. High in the air this creature soared and from its gentle talons I saw the world like some distant star. Rushing through the bitter cold I saw below my own city set in the fair, green forest. I was put down in the forecourt of the royal temple and there I wept. Gone was the glory. Only stone remained. Grass flourished where our lord had passed; trees sprang up where worshippers had rested, and their strong roots tore apart the great stones. Out of some dark hole came a priest, who smiled at me and beckoned, but I could not move towards him. I awoke in this house. Because of this thing I must return. I am no longer young and will end my days where I was born."

"To return will be a great journey," said Ameyra. "Years must pass before you gain your desire. Why not remain here? Nothing shall be lacking."

The priest shook his head and smiled sadly.

"What is an hour, a day, or a year to me? On the night of the new moon I will set out."

With this decision Ameyra was forced to be content, but it made her hasten the final choice of the prince and court to which she meant to attach herself and her daughter. Over the course of some years she had made searching enquiries in several possible Hindu states, and in consequence had gathered a mass of information regarding the very private life, character, and general suitability of several maharajahs.

She had long discussions with the priest who, much to her annoyance, would not commit himself and left her to make the final choice. With a supreme effort she made up her mind at last and decided in favour of Rao Raja Budh Gopi Bhoji of the small, but powerful, Rajput state of Rajilal which lay many miles to the north-west. This prince was twenty-eight and reputed to be a tolerant ruler and an enlightened and highly-cultured man, who was

beloved of his people, and, what was of prime importance, a well-known patron of dancing girls. One of the main objections to this prince, from Ameyra's point of view, was that he was said to drink heavily, but she comforted herself that this was, after all, a minor vice when compared to others.

Soon after the priest had left her house on the return journey to his ravished city, Ameyra set out with a tiny retinue to visit Rajigarh, the capital of Rajilal, with a view to finding a suitable house in which to live while she prepared the way for Lamia's introduction to the court.

The city, tiny and walled, lay at the foot of a small range of hills which rose up out of a flat and highly cultivated plain. With massive rose-red walls, Rajigarh was a maze of narrow roadways, little more than alleys, over which passed a continual stream of traffic from dawn until dusk.

Accompanied by a junior member of the court, Ameyra inspected several houses and then decided to live outside the city.

"This city has charm, but it stinks, and in summer would be hotter than the furnace mouth," she said firmly to the shocked courtier. "No, I will build a house outside and live there in comfort on a spot I saw when first nearing these walls. There I will have gardens and clean, sweet breezes."

Leaving the city by the vast double gateway, and crossing the market-place beside the great underground water tanks, she suddenly stopped and pointed to one of the lower- tree-covered hills on her right.

"There, on the top of that hill is where my virtuous daughter and I will live," she announced.

Her companion was aghast.

"That cannot be," he cried furiously. "It will sit above even our lord's palace."

"That is child's talk," replied Ameyra scornfully. "The place lies well without the city walls and many trees will hide its position."

"The ground belongs to the Diwan. (Prime Minister of the state.) "He will never sell it to you."

"I will pay his price."

"No. He will not sell it."

To Ameyra's surprise and extreme annoyance this statement turned out to be a true one and she returned in a rage to Ombra, but determined to gain her desire. By employing her considerable influence, combined with judicious bribery, she soon became acquainted with the most private portions of the Diwan of Rajilal's life, much of which did not bear close investigation. As soon as she was quite sure of her facts she sent a letter formally requesting to be allowed to purchase the hill on which to build her house. This was ignored, and so was followed by another letter demanding the sale and backed by threats. This produced a dignified but flat refusal even to consider the matter. Ameyra then played her last

card. She sent by a special messenger a long letter in which she employed a potent form of blackmail.

When the surprised and outraged Diwan received this letter he was reduced to a frenzy of rage, and this was increased when he learned that the would-be purchaser of his land was a woman. He sold the land, however, and at a much lower figure than would have been the case had the negotiations been normal ones. When the news reached the ears of the Maharajah he questioned his Diwan, and when the fierce old man showed signs of acute embarrassment the prince laughed sardonically.

"It seems, Diwan, that this stranger has tamed our tiger," he said. "It is in my mind to wonder on the form of whip that was used."

No sooner was the purchase completed than an army of workmen settled on the hill like a cloud of horse-flies. Marbles and rosy sandstone from distant quarries arrived in lumbering bullock carts and slowly the house took form. It was not too large, or too blatant, and it was cunningly hidden by the surrounding trees. The work was followed with much speculation and interest by the people and court at Rajigarh, and Ameyra skilfully fostered the air of mystery which grew up around the owner and the reasons for her coming to live in the state. Extravagant stories of her beauty, her wealth, and her power, became a topic of conversation and the common people grew to be proud of their new resident. The hill and what could be seen of the house was pointed out to country cousins on visits to the capital, and mouths fell open when fantastic tales were told of its owner.

CHAPTER III

BEFORE finally leaving Ombra Ameyra gave several banquets for her old friends. At the one for the high caste Hindu nobility Lamia was permitted to be present, this being in the nature of a dress rehearsal for her daughter's appearance at the court of Rajilal. Ameyra introduced the girl to the assembled guests in a dramatic manner.

In the panelled room, where the gorgeously clad guests had finished their varied and costly meal, there was an air of great expectation, the hostess having broadly hinted that an unusual form of entertainment was to be presented.

Down the centre of the room, and between the two lines of squatting noblemen, were spread two vast and priceless Persian carpets, and, in the vaulted roof above, hanging silver lamps threw out a pulsating rosy light which had a softening effect upon everything, even upon the fierce, proud faces of the guests. Ameyra,

wearing a tightly fitting bodice and full skirt of peacock blue and silver brocade, stood close to the main door of the room. Suddenly she clapped her hands and at once the door was flung open and through it came the sounds from stringed instruments and the thin wail of a reed-like pipe. With dramatic suddenness Lamia appeared in the doorway and then glided a few paces into the room where she stood poised and motionless for a long minute. Her full dress reaching to her ankles was of the finest lilac-coloured silk heavily embroidered with floral designs, while across the short sleeved bodice was flung a rosy sari which also covered her face.

While every eye was fixed on the girl she slowly put up her hands and gracefully flung aside the sari and there followed instantly deep indrawings of breath among the guests as they gazed in astonishment on the girl's loveliness. Lamia now advanced down the room and sinking on to the middle of the nearest carpet she began one of the sitting dances taught her by the priest. In time with the distant music, languid and soothing, the dance had a distinctly hypnotizing effect upon the audience. With swaying body and rhythmical movements of the arms and hands, which fell into pose after momentary pose, she sat cross-legged with downcast eyes and an enigmatical smile hovering about her lips.

Ameyra, still standing near the door, watched the effect upon her guests and smiled with complete satisfaction: there was no doubt whatsoever that Lamia had caused a major sensation. As soon as the dance was over and the music had died away in a high pitched wail, Ameyra moved down the room, helped her daughter to her feet, and proceeded to introduce her to the more important of the guests. Each vied with the other in showering the most flowery compliments on both mother and daughter.

Later that night when all the guests had departed and the house was quiet Lamia, wearied by the excitement yet joyously exalted, turned to her mother before going to her own rooms.

"They were well pleased with me, my mother?" she inquired eagerly. "Did their pretty compliments come from the heart, or merely the lips?"

"Assuredly from the heart, my daughter," replied Ameyra quickly and earnestly. "All were enchanted by your grace and beauty. I watched their faces while you danced and know this to be indeed true."

"Will he of Rajilal think likewise?"

"He will be of marble if he is not blinded, and if desire does not take him by the throat."

"Did you see him? Is he really young and handsome?" cried Lamia with increasing excitement. "You have told me nothing concerning your visit to his city."

"I did not see his face, but as I have told you countless times, all reports say he is comely and soft of heart," replied Ameyra a little wearily.

“When do we depart for that place, my mother?”

“On the third day of the next moon, the house in which we shall live now being fully prepared. Be not impatient. We must hasten slowly. Many things remain still to be done before you can dance before this prince. Much will depend upon the short time that you will appear before his eyes. If aught should go amiss at that time our plans will be as naught. Remember the words of the Jain, who said the path you must tread narrows to that no wider than the spider’s thread. One step at fault and death may be our lot, therefore curb your desires and pray ever to the gods that they do not forget us in our time of need. Go now. Sleep, lest your bloom should lose its freshness.”

The arrival of Ameyra and her daughter at the new house on the hill by Rajigarh was so unobtrusive that it was some time before it became generally known she was in residence. At once, but with much deliberation, Ameyra began her final preparations, which were intricate, because Lamia was no ordinary dancing girl whose introduction would have been simple and merely a matter of payment.

Ameyra was acutely aware that she had made a bitter enemy of the Diwan, and knew that if he suspected her real motives he would instantly take preventative measures, which—if not fatal to her plans—might prove extremely tiresome. As a result of this, Lamia’s presence was kept a closely guarded secret, although her mother continued to live as she had done in Omra. There were discreet comings and goings at the house, but only by members of the court, and in consequence it soon became known what Ameyra really was. The people of Rajigarh, far from being scandalized, were proud that such a woman of wealth, and obvious culture and influence, should have chosen their state in which to live.

One of Ameyra’s most frequent visitors was Ram Bahu, one of the senior court chamberlains, and she handled him skilfully, flattering and paying him marked attention. One day she tactfully broached the subject of her daughter, telling him of the priest from the East and how he had taught the girl many strange and fascinating dances.

“It is well known to me, my friend, that you are well versed in such things,” she said one afternoon when they were seated alone in the large garden beside the central courtyard. “I should be ever grateful if you would watch her dances and then tell me if they have merit. Being strange and utterly unlike our own I am doubtful concerning them.”

“O Moonlike Personality, indeed I will see her and then speak of that which forms in my mind,” replied the man. “Has your virtuous daughter beauty and grace?”

“She is passing fair,” replied Ameyra smiling. “She shall now, at this time, show you what skill she possesses so that my mind may rest.”

Ram Bahu was taken into the house, where, after watching Lamia perform several dances, he expressed himself as being enchanted, and as soon as the girl had retired he turned to Ameyra in some excitement.

"Our lord should see your beautiful daughter," he exclaimed eagerly. "He delights in the dance and the sight of fair women. She is lovely beyond all imagining, and if our prince should look upon her with favour great would be the rewards he would shower upon you."

Ameyra feigned acute alarm and started to her feet.

"Such could not be," she cried hastily. "My daughter is no common dancing girl, but to me a pearl of price to be kept unsullied."

The chamberlain, completely deceived by the surprising reluctance, now became earnest and persuasive, knowing that if the Maharajah saw this girl he would at once desire her, and that he, Ram Bahu, would get all the credit for finding her. Slowly and with a great show of reluctance, Ameyra allowed herself to appear ready to consider the suggestion that Lamia might appear and dance at a coming durbar.

"I myself will guard and stand beside her, apart from the other dancing girls," he said eagerly. "It is also in my mind that this should be kept a secret between us. If your daughter comes before our lord without warning, his senses will be stunned by her loveliness and his heart will be indeed soft towards you, her mother."

"What matter if your lord's heart be soft as ghi, or hard as sandstone towards me? I do not need the favour of princes," replied Ameyra proudly. "I am Ameyra and not without wealth and power. I will consider this matter of the dancing. If your lord did look upon her with favour I should not be displeased, but it must be made clear to all that she is not an 'all such' girl to be overlooked by the low born and the lewd."

Ram Bahu assured his hostess that this was fully understood and continued to endeavour to extract a promise that the girl should appear at the durbar.

"It is in my mind to consider deeply before I permit this thing," she replied. "Go now and return in three days when we will talk again."

The chamberlain departed, leaving Ameyra to smile contentedly to herself. Everything appeared to be moving exactly according to her plan. What followed now rested with Lamia and the gods.

In due course, Ameyra allowed herself to be persuaded to let her daughter dance at the durbar, which was to be held towards the end of the month; but one of the conditions she made was that the girl should perform the strange dance on the right-rope, which was her most important and impressive performance.

On the appointed day, Lamia, with her mother in attendance, was installed in a certain portion of the zenana and her presence kept a close secret. The excited girl was bathed, and scented, and

her lovely black hair oiled and combed, and smoothed until it lay as close to her head as woven silk. The eyes were made to seem larger even than they were by skilful tinting with antimony; the palms of her hands were reddened; her eyebrows re-plucked; and, finally, her breath was scented with oil of jasmine. Her dress was one worthy of a queen. It was long and full, and made of kingfishers' feathers, and had cost a great sum. Her tight little bodice was of amber silk almost covered with seed pearls, and over all was flung a long sari of the finest white silk.

"You are fit to appear before the Great Moghul himself," said Ameyra, inspecting her daughter with much pride in the tiny room of the palace. "Remember all that has been taught you, Heart of Hearts, and above all be modest and do not look him in the face."

Lamia, quivering with excitement, said that she would remember.

"Oh my mother, if I should find favour in his eyes then my heart will overflow with joy. You say that he is young and handsome." She sighed. "But it has just entered my mind that if this be so then there must be many women in his zenana."

"None so lovely or virtuous as you, my child. The dancing girls, as I know well, are vain as the peacock, and as senseless as the wayside monkey. The only knowledge they possess is of the bed. If he speaks with you remember that the love of men is only held when beauty is combined with intelligence and sober wisdom. Never forget that a soul drugged with passion struggles free when desire is satiated. Drink this so that your fears shall vanish." She handed to her daughter a tiny cup filled with a potent drug used to calm the nerves and exalt the spirit.

Lamia drained the cup and coughed a little at its strong contents, and with her mother's excellent advice still in her ears she was taken to the durbar hall, leaving her mother to sit cross-legged before the window of the room and offer up prayers to her gods.

The palace lay on the lower slopes of the hill at whose base the city was built, and it was a great straggling affair with towering walls and an interior constructed on many different levels. There were flights of steps everywhere; leading to water gardens, to decorated alcoves, and to open-air durbar halls. The main entrance was approached by a wide, steep roadway which ended at the huge gateway where the curiously armed guard lounged and gossiped with those passing in and out of the palace.

The zenana was on that side of the palace which looked down on to the outer gardens bordering a large lake, and it was closely shut off from the rest of the scattered buildings. In it were dozens of small rooms connected by a maze of outdoor and indoor passages, some of which led down to the underground bathrooms, others ended in marble lattices through which the women could watch public functions taking place in rooms or halls below, and, finally, a few passages opened on to charming little gardens, each with a shallow pool.

When Lamia was taken from her room on the way to the durbar hall, she was completely enveloped in a loose purdah gown with a tiny rectangular and lace-covered eyepiece. The chamberlain, who was personally conducting her, wore an anxious frown as he urged her to hasten, but Lamia, who had never worn such a gown before, found the journey a dangerous and slow progress.

The durbar was being held to celebrate an ancient victory, and to it had been summoned all those of noble birth in the state. The hall was a great, rectangular room with white marble walls profusely inlaid with floral designs in semi-precious stones, and lighted by huge lamps hanging from the arched roof. It was now a magnificent and an animated scene. At the far end, in the centre of three large alcoves, was the Maharajah sitting cross-legged on a great couch which had neither arm rests nor legs, and grouped behind him were splendidly attired officials and attendants. Stretching away down either side in two densely packed rows were the nobles and courtiers in ceremonial clothes, squatting on plump cushions. The rich coats of brocade, splendid pugris, and gleaming jewels were in strange contrast to the fierce, proud warrior faces, with their great jet beards trained outwards and upwards until they resembled gigantic moustaches. Some of the nobles were old, their beards grey, and, in a few cases, pure white, but the dark faces and flashing eyes were still virile. There was a low hum of conversation and the air was heavy with perfume.

The serious business of the durbar was over when Lamia was brought into the far end of the hall and made to stand near the chamberlain. Still wearing the purdah cloak, she peered about and watched as much as possible of the splendid scene, and she naturally concentrated her gaze upon the distant figure of the prince, but he was too far away for her to see his face distinctly, although the glittering and sparkling of his jewels was apparent every time he made a slight movement.

Between the rows of squatting nobles was a wide clear space on which was spread carpets, and in the left-hand alcove a small band of musicians was preparing to play. Not far from where Lamia stood were several groups of dancing girls, naked to the waist except for breast covering, who whispered, and giggled, and regarded Lamia's shrouded figure with deep and obvious interest.

"When do I dance?" she enquired of her companion.

"Not yet. First must come the court dancers and singers, as is the rule," he replied. "Be not impatient. Wearied by all that will go before, our lord will regard you as a refreshing sight."

Lamia nodded and turned back to her watching. It was, however, a long time before her turn arrived. Many dances were performed, some by single girls, others by groups of them, but all were unoriginal and no one paid much attention; they were merely a part of the durbar and everyone had seen them often before. During this time the Maharajah talked to single guests summoned to his couch,

or drank from a golden goblet, but sometimes he glanced for a moment at a dancer, although without much show of interest.

A small boy, dressed as a fully-equipped warrior, had begun to sing as he postured and revolved on the carpet a few feet from the prince's couch, when the chamberlain caught Lamia's arm.

"Remove the gown," he whispered. "The time has come."

Slowly, and aided by her companion, Lamia drew it off over her head, at the same time being careful to see that her sari completely covered her face. All the dancing girls had now retired and Lamia moved forward and stood on the edge of the nearest carpet, while some of the guests stared at her dress, whose vivid blue feathers shone like jewels in the soft light. The boy, having finished his song on a high-pitched nasal note, was hurried from the scene. The chamberlain now held out one of his hands and Lamia removed her sari and gave it to him. With infinite grace and perfect poise she then started to move down the hall, and from every side came expressions of astonishment as the hardbitten old warriors stared at the newcomer's wondrous beauty. A strange and pregnant silence quickly settled on the hall.

Arriving on the last carpet a few feet in front of the prince's couch, Lamia sank down on it and performed a sitting dance to the music provided by a tiny band of musicians specially engaged. The Maharajah, however, paid no attention whatsoever to her, being deep in conversation with an aged man seated on the couch beside him. The dance completed, Lamia got to her feet and stepped back as two attendants came forward and set up the framework for a tight-rope. The rope was fixed about two feet off the carpet and its ends were stretched taut by the attendants, who now stood at either end.

Stepping lightly on to the thin rope, Lamia did her astonishing dance with grace and without faltering. She swayed, glided to and fro, and rose and fell like some hovering butterfly, and the audience watched her in entranced silence. The dance was nearly over before the Maharajah turned his head languidly in the girl's direction, and she, having stared at him several times, could have wept with disappointment at such a lack of interest. The prince, however, now realized that something most unusual was taking place and he leaned forward and gazed at Lamia, while his soft, dark eyes sparkled with sudden and keen interest.

At this point the dance was over and Lamia stepped off the rope and retired swiftly in accordance with her instructions, but before she reached the end of the hall she was recalled. This time the chamberlain accompanied her, and after whispering to her to wait, he went forward and spoke to the prince, who gave him some order. Returning, he told Lamia that she was to dance again. Her disappointment gone the girl nodded gaily, and smilingly said that she would now do the Courting Dance. During the slight pause that followed, while the musicians were being told what music to play,

Lamia lifted her head and stared long and deeply into the Maharajah's eyes. She then began the dance, and danced as never before. At one point she was supposed to throw her head back and laugh silently, but on this occasion she laughed naturally and the joyous sound rang out high above the wailing music.

Lamia did not retire immediately the dance was over, but stood poised like a bird for flight. Her eyes sparkling and her face flushed she stared at the prince for a long moment, and then, turning, she fled up the hall and made her own way back to where her mother was awaiting her. In the meanwhile the Maharajah again summoned the chamberlain to his couch.

"Who is this lovely creature, this dream of beauty?" he enquired eagerly.

"Huzoor, she lives without the city in the house of her mother, she who bought the land from the Diwan," replied the courtier. "I went to the house, and seeing this virtuous girl it came to my mind that you, our lord, would be gladdened by the sight of her exquisiteness."

"You have done good service," replied the prince smiling. "It shall not be forgotten. We will speak of the matter again when the durbar is finished."

"How went it?" cried Ameyra, catching her daughter by the arm as she ran into the small room. "Is all well?"

"Yes, O Best of Mothers! All is indeed well. Wearied by all that had gone before, at first the prince was indifferent and did not look towards me, and I could have wept with vexation." Lamia then told her mother all that had taken place.

"Good, that is indeed good," said her mother as the girl broke off her long narrative. "All will now go as was planned. Be swift and change your clothes. We must return to our house without delay."

"Return? Leave here?" cried Lamia in bewildered astonishment. "Have you lost your senses, my mother? I have told you he was much attracted."

"O Unskilled in wisdom as a little Child, that is why we go. Cease your talk and do as I bid."

Lamia was almost unclad when the curtain before the doorway was suddenly pulled aside and the chamberlain came into the room. Ameyra protested furiously and instantly drove him out.

"What do you think we are?" she cried as the curtain fell back into its place. "My daughter is no common dancing girl to be looked over at this time by such as you. You are as the grey apes, entirely without shame."

The man grinned to himself behind the curtain.

"O Cream of all the Virtues, I did but bring good news," he said, raising his voice.

"We have no need of news, good or bad," replied Ameyra. "What is it?"

"Our lord has made much enquiry regarding your daughter and would speak with her when the durbar is finished."

"That is not possible," replied Ameyra firmly. "We return instantly to our house."

At this announcement the courtier expressed surprised alarm, and for several minutes a heated argument took place as Ameyra hurried on her daughter's change of clothes. Picking up the wondrous skirt, the bodice, and the sari, she placed them carefully across her arm and, tearing aside the curtain, she faced the indignant chamberlain.

"We go," she announced. "Prevent us and I will have each hair in that beard of yours pulled out one by one and burnt beneath your nose, impudent."

The bewildered Lamia was swept out of the palace into a waiting vehicle and driven homewards at a fast pace. In answer to repeated requests for an explanation Ameyra quoted a rude proverb which can best be translated as 'Denied goods are always desirable.'

As soon as they reached the house Lamia hurried off to Ermi, who, as the years passed, had become a confidant, to whom the girl poured out her hopes, fears, and desires. When the old woman heard all that had occurred at the palace her wrinkled face crumpled up into a series of toothless smiles and grins.

"Praise the gods for these things," she said gleefully. "Is he truly as handsome as is said in the bazaars?"

"Yes, indeed he is, Ermi. He is young and his eyes flash. His face is that of a god such as I have often seen in my dreams. My heart melted when I looked upon him. Will he love me?" The girl embraced the old servant. "If he did not, then I should wither away and die for very love of him."

"He will become drugged with great passion when he speaks with you, My Heart's Desire. His heart would be cold as a snake's skin if he did not do so."

"Ermi, why did my mother take me with great speed from the palace after our lord's desire to have speech with me? I asked her concerning it and she answered in riddles."

"She is wise beyond many. Doubtless her reason was excellent. Do not question these things, but prepare for sleep so that your freshness does not depart. Come, an ample meal is prepared."

While the old retainer was caring for her daughter, Ameyra went on to the roof, a thing she always did when considering a problem, or was in need of undisturbed contemplation. A quarter moon hung low in the sky and the tree tops rustled as a warm and scented breeze swept across them. Leaning against a balustrade of delicately carved marble, her face was stern and there was a crease between her thin line of eyebrows. She knew she was playing a dangerous game, a game which might conclude in brilliant success, or deadly peril and failure. Deadly was the right word. How would this prince react to her conduct? If what she had learned concerning

him were correct then all might be well, but on the other hand anything could happen. If he were intrigued and amused the reward would be priceless; if he considered himself insulted and outraged then she and her daughter would have to flee the state in haste, leaving all their hopes behind them. This possibility had already been thought of and plans prepared.

She suddenly left her resting place and began to walk up and down the flat roof, her dress swirling softly to her movements. How long the hours would be until the dawn. She could not sleep, the strain of anxious waiting was too great. Would it not have been better to have left the state at once? Her hands twisted themselves together. Oh that she could read the future. Had not the aged Jain priest spoken of disaster and death? What would the Diwan, her bitter enemy, say and do? Undoubtedly something unpleasant. He might even whisper words of violence into his master's ears. She passed a hand across her forehead and sighed. She was like a young tree bending first this way and then that in the gale of her uneasy thoughts.

Dawn broke at last and with it came Ameyra's personal maid seeking her mistress. She discovered her asleep on a wide marble seat, her head resting on a curled arm like an overtired child. Bending down the maid shook her gently.

"Awake, the dawn is here," she coaxed, a soft light in her bold eyes. "This air is cool and dangerous."

Ameyra stirred, sat up, and after yawning got to her feet and allowed herself to be led downstairs to her bedroom. Here she was persuaded to lie on the bed and in a few minutes was fast asleep again.

A herald of the gathering storm in the palace appeared in the early evening of that day in the form of Ram Bahu, the senior chamberlain. Ameyra received him in the special guest room.

"My house is honoured," she said smiling and showing none of the searing anxiety she felt. "Seat yourself and be refreshed."

The visitor, however, stood, and scowled, and fingered his moustache.

"You have entirely blackened my face, O Affliction, O Burden Most Grievous," he growled. "Would that I had never looked upon your ill-omened face and that of your luckless daughter."

Instead of being indignant at these insults, Ameyra hastily suppressed a sigh of the deepest relief. All was well. Had it not been so this man would never have opened the interview on such a personal note, but rather with a royal command, or even worse.

"I understand what lies in your mind, my friend," she said evenly. "Because your lord was pleased with my most excellent daughter that does not make her a common dancing girl, free for casual love. Your memory is as short as an ape's tail," she continued with growing heat. "It was agreed between us that my

lovely daughter should dance before your prince for his pleasure and delight."

"What then?" cried the chamberlain furiously. "Would you hold out a luscious fruit and withhold it when the hand is put out to grasp it?"

It was now the woman's turn to assume the fury of outraged indignation.

"Knave! Rascal! You would ensnare us. It was in your evil mind, O Utterly Depraved One, that my daughter should share his couch. It is not in your unclean mind that there are women who cannot be plucked at will, even by princes. Go! Go before I have you beaten."

Ram Bahu, taken aback by this unexpected outburst, hesitated and was lost, his opponent being swift to follow up her advantage. She bore down upon him menacingly, fingers bent as if to claw his face. He retreated hastily and as he reached the door she pushed him through it so that he staggered.

"Return! Return to your lair, Yelping Jackal," she called after him. "This house is unblessed by your presence."

The chamberlain vanished, and smiling contentedly Ameyra went to a window and stood leaning on the sill as she looked down into the warm and charming courtyard from which the newness was quickly wearing off.

A long pause elapsed before anything else took place; the pause was so prolonged indeed that Ameyra grew anxious again. Had her plans miscarried after all? If so, then in what manner? It was late in the evening of the second day after the durbar that Ram Bahu came again to the house, but Ameyra refused to see him, although not without due consideration. The point that worried her was how far she could go in thus flouting palace authority, but she comforted herself with the thought that strong-minded women had done such things in the past and without dire consequences.

Once more she went up on to the roof, but this time Lamia was with her as she paced up and down like a restless tigress. The girl watched her mother and wondered what was happening. In spite of continual questioning she had only received the vaguest of answers.

"Why are you behaving thus?" enquired the girl. "Have your plans faded that you should act as a monkey with mange?"

Ameyra promptly lost her patience, and, stopping, faced her daughter.

"O Fool! O Entirely Lacking in Sense," she cried. "Can you not see beyond the point of your nose? Have you not watched them fishing by the river banks at Ombra? When a heavy fish is taken, never is it brought out at once, as you well know. Now do you understand, senseless one? They play it gently until at last it may be grasped with the hand. So do I with this prince."

Lamia drew herself up with calm dignity.

"Even so, my mother, but it is said, and truly, that those who bait princes catch lightning by the tail."

Ameyra was too astonished to reply at once. Turning away she laughed.

"Forgive me, my daughter, I did but speak from an overwrought mind. It is true I gamble with disaster, but it is for your sake."

"Entirely, my mother?" asked the girl. "To be the mother of a queen is not without advantage."

"Oh," cried the elder woman angrily. "Utterly shameless. I——" She broke off suddenly as she saw Ermi hastening towards her.

"He waits below craving audience," hissed the old woman, quivering with excitement and breathlessness.

"Who waits?"

"His Highness the Diwan himself. I faint with apprehension."

When Ameyra descended and entered the special guest chamber, the Diwan, an elderly man with a huge, pure white beard brushed back across his face, turned and saw her. In his glittering eyes was a fierce gleam of hate, but the woman ignored it, although her heart beat fast and the blood mounted to her throat.

She greeted her distinguished visitor with exquisite politeness, bowing her head slightly. Without speaking the Diwan held out a lean brown hand and resting on the palm was a solid gold and highly embossed bracelet. At the sight of it Ameyra caught her breath. She had won. Victory was hers, victory, glorious and intoxicating. This gift, brought in such a manner from the Maharajah, symbolized a request and not a command.

Taking the bracelet she slipped it over her right hand and the proud old courtier watched her. Glancing up she caught his eyes fixed on her face and shivered slightly as he turned and left the room. How true it was that never so lovely a garden but that a snake lurked in it. Here was a snake deadly as the krait.

CHAPTER IV

AMEYRA's acceptance of the royal gift resulted in the appearance next day of Ram Bahu. He arrived so early that the gardeners were watering the flowers in the courtyards and the mistress of the house was still in her room. A surprised servant requested him to wait on a verandah which looked on to the fish-pond surrounded by sweetly scented flowers and shrubs. Squatting cross-legged on two cushions the chamberlain watched a servant bring a dish of plantains, mangoes, lichees, and fat Kabuli grapes. Then came a bowl of creamy milk, a platter of warmly brown chappatees, and a small dish of sweetmeats, all for Ameyra's breakfast.

When she came at last from her room she was clad in a loose,

flowing robe of white silk with a girdle of pink silk. They greeted each other as if no disagreement or unpleasantness had occurred between them.

"I hope the Refresher of Hearts has good health?" enquired the man.

"Of the best, O Exquisite Politeness," replied Ameyra lightly, as she sat down on her cushions and picked up a plantain which she began to peel. "Why is this house honoured, but at such an unseemly hour?"

"Does not the child howl for the stars and the lover yearn for his beloved," answered the man, taking a mango from the dish which had been pushed towards him.

"Yes, and the modest and the virtuous ever shrink coyly," answered Ameyra, her mouth full of fruit.

Because it fitted her mood she carried on this metaphoric form of conversation until at last it wearied her.

"Now we will speak with open hearts and clear minds," she announced.

Ram Bahu nodded eagerly and before he left, half an hour later, it had been arranged that Lamia should proceed to the palace for an interview with the prince. Ameyra, however, warned the man that she would take swift and dreadful vengeance if any harm came to her daughter.

When the heat of the day had begun to cool in the early evening, it was an excited and highly delighted Lamia who sat alone in a bullock cart hung with heavy red purdah curtains. The cart rumbled through the city's massive gateway and over the airless narrow streets. Her wide-set, dark eyes danced as they peeped out between the folds of the cloth and her tiny hands were restless.

Was it possible to remember all that her mother had said to her before leaving? She wrinkled her smooth forehead. She must be shy and above all modest, and yet firm, speaking neither too much nor too little. She might smile, but must not laugh, and above all she must flatter if possible. How difficult it sounded. If only she could be her natural, joyous self. Would she be frightened when she found herself alone with him? He would be the first man, apart from greybeards and priests, that she had spoken with alone. How fascinating was that rare perfume her mother had dabbed on her neck and rubbed into portions of her hair.

Would she never arrive? Fifty curses on this slow cart. Why could she not have come in a proper vehicle as was done on the first occasion? Then, in through the palace gateway, with its lounging guards who grinned when they saw the purdah cart, and shouted crude jests to each other.

"Here comes the Queen of Delhi," cried one.

"Yes, yet another flower for our lord's garden."

"Doubtless she is shameless and without virtue," hooted a third, knowing full well that the girl could hear him.

This was too much for Lamia, who was shaking with indignation. Putting her mouth to the folds in the curtain she made reply.

"Devil's Spawn," she hissed. "Hold your insolent tongues, O Ill-bred Sons of Dogs. When I tell your lord of this he will have your tongues torn out."

This threat resulted in a dead silence, broken only by uneasy shufflings of sandalled feet.

"Forgive! We did but jest, Rejoicer of Souls," called one soldier as the cart passed on.

Lamia smiled to herself, knowing that this had been the case. Here, for the first time in her short life, she tasted the first heady drops of power. Men had trembled at her words.

At the foot of the broad steps leading up to the massive and beautiful zenana gateway, beyond the upper palace courtyard, the halted cart was met by the chamberlain who helped her out of it. Now wearing a long and full purdah cloak, which she had hastily slipped over her head, she was led up the steps past the heavily armed guards. Just inside the gateway, and with a few whispered words, Ram Bahu handed the girl over to a three-quarters veiled young woman.

"Go with her, and may you find favour in his eyes," said the man. "Do not forget also to speak well of me to him."

Papeeta, the young woman, giggled, caught Lamia's left hand, and took her up a steep flight of steps. At the top they halted for a moment.

"You are she of whom all the palace speaks?" suggested the girl. "You danced before our lord at the durbar?"

"Yes, I danced for his pleasure," replied Lamia, her voice muffled by the cloak.

"You are indeed favoured of Krishna. Come, I will lead you to the room."

Side by side they crossed several tiny roof gardens, each with a pool and pleasing shrubs in great earthenware pots; down passage ways until they came to a small room whose narrow doorway was covered by a heavy curtain. Using both hands, Papeeta held it aside and Lamia passed in.

The room, ventilated by a long, narrow marble screen set high up in one wall, was lighted by a large swinging lamp in the vaulted roof. Spread over the floor was a great red and purple Bokhara carpet, and piled against a wall were numerous plump cushions and several bolster-like armrests. There were two low tables, and on one was a dish of fruit and another of sweetmeats.

Lamia now turned to her guide, who assisted her to remove the airless purdah cloak.

"Where is he?" she asked, sighing with relief at being able to breathe freely again.

"He will come," replied Papeeta with another giggle as she held the cloak over one arm and unfastened her veil.

The two women stared at each other and Lamia knew that here was someone with whom she could make friends. The girl's face was round, plump, and good natured. Her ample mouth and dark eyes were made for laughter and jollity, and they grew round with astonishment as she stared at Lamia's beauty.

"By the gods you are fairer than any I have seen," she cried with obvious pleasure. "They spoke truly in the courtyards of this palace."

Lamia smiled happily and impulsively embraced Papeeta.

"We will become friends? I am alone and my heart trembles."

"Assuredly," replied the other girl eagerly. "Now I must be gone. Soon he will come to you. How are you named?"

Lamia told her.

"Lamia, it has a pretty sound. I am Papeeta and will return when he has departed. The gods be with you and guard you. He is sweet-natured. Have no fears."

The girl turned and vanished behind the curtain which fell back into its place with heavy sighings.

Maharajah Rao Raja Budh Gopi Bhoji was twenty-nine years old and extremely good looking. He possessed the well-born Indian's clean, fine-drawn breeding. His skin was dark but clear, with a satin-like texture. His features were small and delicately moulded, with a straight nose and sensitive nostrils and well-set greyish-green eyes which were a throwback from some northern ancestor, probably a woman from out of the northern passes. His eyebrows were thin and straight, and he wore a line of close-cut moustache over his somewhat full mouth. His figure was still slim and active, and his hands long and thin, and inclined to be restless.

This man was unusual in many ways and not the least of them was the fact that his eyes twinkled more often than they hardened. There were many of the fierce, proud, old-fashioned noblemen of the court who looked with disfavour on certain aspects of their ruler's character. Rajputs were fighters, swashbucklers, raiders of other state's women, and heavy drinkers, and they viewed artistic activities with suspicion. The Maharajah was well aware of this, but he laughed and continued to spend much of his time in listening to music, reading, and patronizing the arts generally. Nevertheless he was a fine horseman, a deadly swordsman, and fond of the hunt.

As would be expected from such a man he was a tolerant ruler, pardoning rather than punishing, although in cases of necessity he could be as hard, cruel, and vindictive as any of his neighbours. He studied the welfare of his people, but in this he was somewhat handicapped and influenced by his strong-willed mother, an old lady who exercised much power from behind the zenana walls.

The Maharajah's most serious failing was his weakness for wine.

When he had drunk deeply its effect was to make him maudlin, sentimental, and sometimes boastful, but rarely pugnacious.

His wife was a down-country Hindu who was completely under the influence of her mother-in-law. A timid, gentle creature, with eyes of a startled deer, she continually gave birth to sickly children who died almost at once. His wealth, accumulated down the centuries, was fabulous, but this was never drawn upon but rather added to, as was the age-old custom. Because the court lived in comparative simplicity the people were not burdened by taxes, the most expensive item in the state budget being that for the state elephants, for whom the prince and the people had a passion. On all state occasions the great beasts were paraded to the pleasure of all Rajilal.

Lamia considered some of these things as she sat cross-legged on a pair of cushions. Her mood alternated between fright and excitement. She knew that not only her fate, but that of her mother's as well, hung upon the outcome of the interview. Suddenly she offered up a hasty, childish prayer to the gods, and as she did so the great curtain quivered and was held aside. The Maharajah entered the room. He stood near the doorway for a long moment, his right hand toying with the gold hilt of a short ceremonial sword hanging from his right side. Lamia stared up at him with scared eyes and then scrambling to her feet started to make her salutations. Smiling, he stopped her as he seated himself on the cushions and drew the girl down beside him.

"Chit! You dared to flout my officers and tickle my displeasure," he said abruptly and with assumed gravity.

"No, my lord, it was not I," replied Lamia hastily. "I am the Heaven Born's slave." She bent forward and touched his slippers. "He is angered with me?"

"No, although it came into my mind to have your mother bastinadoed until she screamed for mercy."

"But she is the best of mothers and I love her. She is also as wise as many Brahmins," answered the girl, forgetting her nervousness.

The Maharajah nodded gravely, a little smile playing about his lips.

"I understand. I also have a mother who is wise and strong-willed, and because of it I held my hand. Now, Lovelier than the Rose, how are you named?" he enquired, clapping his hands for an attendant and ordering wine to be brought.

"I am Lamia." She lifted her delicious little chin proudly. "He who read my horoscope in youth gave it to me, saying its meaning was 'She who walks skilfully.'"

"A pretty name and worthy of one so fair who carries it."

"My lord is pleased to be gracious."

He attempted to take her hand but she slipped it away.

"How are you named?" she asked softly but boldly.

"I? I have so many that often they are not in my mind. What will you name me? What heart-name rises to your lips, O Jewel of Hindustan?"

"My lord, it is not fitting, or seemly."

At this moment a gorgeously clad attendant appeared carrying a fat-bellied wine bottle and two goblets of amber-coloured glass. He set them down on a table, salaamed deeply and vanished, but not before he had taken a good look at Lamia's face. At once the Maharajah poured out an ample allowance of yellow wine into the two goblets. Picking up one he offered it to the girl, who shook her head.

"Such things are not for me, my lord. I do not yet need wine to stir my mind to harmonious thoughts."

The man made a humorous grimace, paused, and then drained the goblet.

"Well said. You excite me with your wondrous beauty. Come close that I may inhale the perfume of your exquisite presence."

The girl, remembering her mother's urgent advice, again shook her head and lowered her eyelids.

"No, the time is not yet. You and I are but newly met. I am young and know little of love. The tiny, eager seedling is swiftly drowned in the flood, my lord."

Smiling good humouredly he lay back among the cushions and regarded Lamia through half-closed eyelids.

"In that you differ from your mother who, if all be true, is a very Queen of Love."

"As my lord says. She is aware of it," answered Lamia demurely. "In the matter of men she knows much that is good, and more that is bad. Many times she has told me that all men are alike, being but greedy, brawling boys, vainer than many peacocks. She also says that a beautiful girl with a cupful of brains can lead any man as a camel is guided by its nose peg. What think you, my lord?"

"I think your mother and my mother are as two beans in a pod." He laughed softly. "When next I go to see her I will enquire concerning the matter. Such words of wisdom from you, O Pearl of Asia, are as would-be endearments from the lips of my Diwan. Women are made for love and not for wisdom, and yet from you it warms my heart, who am weary of empty love and ceaseless flattery. Is it known to you, O Wise One, that love to satisfy must be of the mind as of the body?"

"Yes, my lord. He from the East, who taught me many wise things, said this often. To spur me on with desire for greater learning he said the wise man looks always beyond to the mind which lies behind a beautiful face."

"Ho ho!" The Maharajah chuckled and refilled his goblet, having already emptied Lamia's. "What shall be found in that little head of yours?" He held out the dish of sweetmeats and the

girl took a lump of yellow stickiness and popped it into her mouth, and then licked her fingers with the tip of a tiny, pink tongue.

"It is said, my lord, that to see if the kernel be sweet and whole the nut must first be cracked."

The prince nodded, drank his wine, and proceeded skilfully to draw the girl out on the subject of herself. In a short time Lamia had lost her nervousness and was chattering as freely as she would have done to Ermi. She told of her life in Ombra; of the great flood; the arrival of the priest; of her mother's famous panels; and a hundred other details. Her companion listened and grew more and more astonished as he realized how unusual this girl was.

Suddenly she became fully aware of where she was and to whom she was talking. She blushed, broke off, and wrung her hands.

"Ah hi! My mother will be gravely angered," she gasped, tears standing in her eyes. "I have forgotten and chattered. I am lacking in respect and modesty. My lord will now spurn me and send me away."

"Now indeed you speak senselessly, O Most Rare Thing." The Maharajah caught one of the girl's hands in his own and she did not withdraw it. "You have captivated me. I am entranced."

Lamia glanced at him doubtfully as he nodded gravely and his eyes twinkled. Then he let go of her hand, shook his head as if he had come to a decision, and got to his feet. He stood looking down at the girl with a curious half-smile on his face.

"When first I came here it was in my mind that this night should end differently, O Begetter of Passion. I am, however, well content. Did that priest tell you the flames of love should be fanned by the cold breeze of denial?"

"My lord is very wise. It was even so," answered Lamia, gay once more. Then greatly daring she made a request. "Before you depart I crave a boon. If I am to return to this place I may for one moon have my mother near at hand?"

The man threw his head back and laughed heartily.

"Indeed a strange request. The girls in this palace hasten to cast off their mothers as a snake its old skin. But it shall be as you desire, although she and I must never meet." He then shook a finger at the girl in mock sternness. "It is my command that you return to-morrow, when all shall be prepared. Will you indeed come willingly, or shall I have to send my army to fetch you?"

"My lord, each minute will be a moon before we meet again."

"Well said. Farewell. In the days that are to come you will understand I do not now leave without——" He broke off, wrenched aside the curtain, and was gone.

Lamia scrambled to her feet and stood staring at the curtain. Her heart told her that he loved her. What else mattered? Her content knew no bounds. She loved him. She would willingly die for him. Now that he was gone she was in darkness. A blackness enveloped her soul and she gave a little cry of distress. It was

then the curtain moved again and Papeeta dashed into the room, her good-natured face startled and distressed.

"What has befallen?" she gasped, holding Lamia's arm. "I waited in the outer rooms and he strode past me as if in much agitation. Others saw this thing and there is much discussion as to its reason."

Lamia laughed and embraced the astonished Papeeta.

"My heart sings sweetly, Papeeta. I could die of pure happiness," she cried.

"What of him? Never before have we seen him thus," exclaimed the bewildered girl. "What was said? Did he love you? Why are you thus?"

"Take me from here, Papeeta," replied Lamia a little wildly. "I am stricken dumb and senseless with love. To-morrow I will return and then if the gods are kind I will open my heart."

When Lamia, exhausted with excitement and emotion, eventually arrived home she was pounced on by her mother, who stared with consternation at her distracted face.

"What befell? Tell me," she demanded. "Is all well, or did you loose your senses? You are gravely distraught."

The girl embraced her mother tightly. She hugged her and laid her cheek against Ameyra's for a long minute.

"He loves me," she whispered. "My heart tells me so." She paused. "I am now a straw in the flood of my emotion, O Best of Mothers. I will be alone." Breaking away, Lamia ran to her room, leaving the elder woman a prey to a disturbing variety of feelings.

CHAPTER V

Not long after Lamia's return from the palace an official arrived and held a long conversation with Ameyra. He left in due course richer than he had arrived. No sooner was the man gone than a feverish bout of packing took place and the whole household was hustled into wakefulness.

With the first glimmerings of dawn, Lamia was roused and the final preparations for her departure were completed. When mother and daughter arrived in the palace it was, for the most part, still asleep, only a few water carriers and sweepers being visible. They were at once wafted into the zenana and met by a yawning Papeeta, who led them to the quarters which had been set aside for the girl's use. These were situated high up in the outer walls, which fell sheer to the rocky base of the hillside out of which the palace rose.

There were three rooms reached by a passage only wide enough for one person at a time. There was an inner room, an outer one,

and a side room, and all three opened into each other. The inner room was spacious and roughly square and a beautiful doorway with semi-circular facings led to the outer, which was long and comparatively narrow. Here were two side windows and a central one which led on to a small covered balcony clinging to the walls like a swallow's nest.

The walls of the two main rooms were of dead white marble inlaid with semi-precious stones in charming floral and geometrical designs. The ceiling of the inner room was slightly vaulted and overlaid with sheets of silver on which were many golden roses. On the floors were thin, silken rugs whose colours glowed like gems as shafts of light struck them. There were a few low tables and many cushions and armrests piled against the walls. Silver hanging lamps hung down which were pierced so as to resemble fine lace. A gilt censer swung from the roof giving out little puffs of grey smoke and the perfume of burning cedar and sandalwood.

In the side room were long, rectangular boxes against the walls in which dresses and clothes were placed; tables on which were combs, oils, scents, a washing powder, and cloths of finest cotton. To one side was a silver ewer and basin, and two water jars. A hole near the floor connected with a spout through which waste water could be removed.

"These are named the Moti Jagah," announced Papeeta, leading the way down the passage to the quarters. "They are used for ranees who come to visit our lord's mother, or his wife." She held aside the heavy, purple brocade curtain before the door. "Our lord came himself last night to over-see the setting. It is not without charm."

Closely followed by her mother, Lamia hurried in and stood for a moment gazing about with raptuous eyes. She then gave a series of delightful cries as she ran from room to room.

"It is indeed fitting," exclaimed Ameyra, looking with more critical eyes as she moved to and fro. "I am well content."

"See, here is the place for the jewels," cried the girl, putting her hand into an opening in a wall just large enough to take her tiny palm. This was a kind of pocket in the wall where jewels were placed for greater security. "Ah hi! It has contents," she cried in surprise, and at once brought out a necklace which she held up.

The piece of jewellery was three strings of pearls joined together so as to form a band. An oval, flat ruby set in seed pearls formed a pendant. Papeeta, standing nearby, smiled and nodded.

"He himself placed it there," she announced. "He whispered to me that it would doubtless give you pleasure."

"Indeed, I am enraptured." Lamia ran to her mother, who smilingly adjusted the necklace about the slim neck. "It is not lovely beyond all?" she cried excitedly.

"Yes, it has much charm and is ancient," agreed her mother.

While Lamia stood fingering her gift Ameyra turned to Papeeta. "Who are you?" she enquired kindly.

"I am Papeeta. My father is Kumar Jivan of this court. He oversees the ceremonies and attends the pleasure and comfort of those who come to visit our lord. I am to be her companion, seeing that she lacks nothing."

"That is good. I see you are sweet-natured." Ameyra moved aside. "Come, to work."

There followed must bustling and running to and fro, as Lamia's belongings were brought in. Dresses were put in the boxes, slippers, saris, and a hundred other necessities placed each in its proper order. When all was as Ameyra wished it to be, Papeeta fled away to bring breakfast. She returned with two aged dames, who placed the usual dishes of fruit, unleavened bread, and bowls of milk on the tables. Ameyra and her daughter then sat down to the meal and Papeeta left them alone.

"I feel that I still dream," said Lamia happily. "This is worthy of a queen's child." She waved a hand vaguely. "When will he come to me?"

"At his pleasure. Doubtless after the heat of the full noon," replied her mother carelessly.

She was, however, wrong in this assumption, because an hour later, when putting the finishing touches to her daughter's satin-like hair, Papeeta rushed in.

"He comes," she panted. "Be swift. You must not be seen." She caught Ameyra by the arm and hurried her away.

A few minutes later the Maharajah, dressed in white jodhpurs and a thin amber-coloured silk tunic with a tightly-rolled, flattish turban set aslant on his hair, pulled aside the curtain. The girl waited for him leaning against the window in the outer room.

"My heart rejoiced when I heard I had no need to send my army, or my elephants, to fetch you, O Breeze of Expectation," he remarked lightly, unbuckling his gold belt and flinging it on to the cushions. "Is all fittingly prepared?"

"I am utterly unworthy," answered Lamia shyly. "All is as befits a queen."

"Prettily said." They passed out on to the balcony and stood side by side. "Ah ho, I see you have already discovered my gift. It pleases you?"

"It is lovely beyond all praise, my lord." The girl glanced down and fingered the necklace.

"It sits well upon you. If was a gift from the Emperor Humayan to my father."

"It was a king's gift?" gasped Lamia. "How favoured I am of Krishna. Are you known to the Emperor Akbar, who lives at Agra and Fatipur Sikri?"

The man smiled at her childish eagerness and patted one of her hands.

"Yes, and he loves me like a brother, and would have me at Agra. He and I share many things, although of different faiths."

"Tell me of him," pleaded the girl, forgetting her shyness.

Her companion, however, smiled and shook his head.

"The time is now short. There is work below waiting for me. If I do not go soon my Diwan will be roaring like a tiger. Princes have to work as hard as other men, Littlest. I did but come to see that all was in order."

"You are a fount of generosity."

"Have you not yet found a heart name? I am weary of this my lord, my lord."

Lamia blushed and looked down at her fingers entwining with each other.

"In the days to come I will put my mind to it. Now I am your slave, the dust on your slippers." She bent down and touched his feet with a swift fluttering motion.

"Before the gods you are not happy, not content?" he exclaimed in astonishment.

"No, my lord, my heart is turned to water and flutters with delight. I could die of happiness," replied the girl keeping her head lowered.

"Why, then, this talk of slaves and dust?" The Maharajah then nodded and laughed. "Ah ho, I understand. Towards love you are as a small child who fears to climb towards the golden fruit. That is good. I will pluck it and hand it to you. I must now go." He turned and went into the inner room, where he picked up his belt. "It will be in the freshness of the evening when I return."

Lamia watched him fix his belt and lifted one of her hands in farewell as he passed beyond the curtain. She then got down on to her knees and leaned on the wide balcony ledge. Her eyes were moist and a great tenderness pervaded her. He was so kind, so understanding, and so gentle. Her love was opening rapidly like the petals of a rose in the sunshine. Gradually, however, she became fully aware of the fascinating view spread out before her.

Below, where the hillside merged into the palace gardens, began a flat, green carpet of tree tops among which rioted several walls jutting out from the main structure. Beyond the trees she could see open spaces of green lawn, flashes from the water of running fish ponds, and the tops of several small temples or summer houses. To the right of the gardens was the city lake, a wide stretch of water with royal terraces and pavilions where it merged into the gardens. On the left from where Lamia was watching, was the mass of flat roofs of the city rising and falling without design or reason, and across them she could see the low hill on which stood her home. In the city were the white, pointed spires of the temples and sudden glimpses of narrow streets crowded with citizens. A dull humming rose up out of which, now and again, there came a distinguishable noise; the furious barking of a dog; a bullock driver's hoarse voice

as he urged on his lumbering beasts; a woman screamed shrilly and a man answered harshly; and then an elephant squealed bad-temperedly from the royal stables.

The sun was now growing too strong for comfort and so, leaving the balcony, Lamia, for want of something better to do, sat down and took up her three-stringed instrument. Plucking it she sang to herself in the high, nasal manner which is considered so attractive in the East. She soon wearied of this and getting to her feet wandered about restlessly. A sudden thought brought her to an abrupt halt near the balcony and it sent a shiver down her back. Was she to be kept in these rooms, never going out into the world as she had done with her mother? In that case she would be a prisoner in all but name. No, he would never treat her like that, but then, what about the strict zenana custom? She must ask her mother about this important question.

Not long afterwards Papeeta came in and the girl at once enquired for her mother. Papeeta laughed and gurgled to herself.

"There has been much trouble. When I took your swift-tongued mother to the place set aside for her use she at once became enraged, saying it was fitted only for the low born. She cursed everyone, including my father, who was sent to the rooms."

Lamia smiled, knowing how eloquent Ameyra could be when angry.

"What then befell?"

"She left the palace in a great passion, saying she would return in the morning. My father is much angered and disturbed, and he tugged his beard, fearing our lord should hear of these things."

Lamia nodded and put an arm round Papeeta's waist.

"Tell me who lives in this zenana."

"Very many live here. There is the old Ranee Jadonji, whom we all fear, and there is also our lord's wife, the Maharanee Aman, and there are many relatives."

"What of the dancing girls?"

Papeeta glanced at her companion and smiled.

"There are fifty and one too many. They live together in one place and all are worse than a cage of monkeys. Always they are quarreling and fighting. Utterly without sense they rage, disturbing even the old ranee who sends and has them beaten, but they do not mend their ways. Their thoughts are only of our lord's favour, presents, sweetmeats, and the bed."

"Do you leave this place, Papeeta? Do you walk in the gardens and play with the ball?"

"I being favoured go to the gardens when our lord is away, but they are for his wife and relatives, and those who are guests in this place. If the old ranee is evil-tempered and finds me there she speaks harshly."

"Ah hi, I understand. Do you never go to the city and such-like?"

"No, it is not seemly. Once I went to Agra with my father, but that was long ago and has almost passed from my memory."

"To be so unfree would wither me away," said Lamia a little sadly. "Do not even the ranees go into the world?"

"Yes, they visit relatives, but we are not such as they. The Maharanee and the old woman go in the next moon to Benares for the Queen's Praying. Perhaps I may go with them."

"I will speak with him concerning this thing," announced Lamia.

"Ah ho, you would speak to him thus?" cried Papeeta, her eyes round with astonishment. "You are indeed bold."

"I am no dancing girl, but come of good blood," cried Lamia lifting her chin.

Papeeta giggled, and changing the subject she asked many questions about Lamia's life before she came to the palace, and the time passed swiftly as they ate sweetmeats and fruit, seated on the cushions in the cool of the inner room.

When the sun was sinking, Lamia was again alone on the tiny balcony. In the distance, beyond the city limits, clouds of reddish-yellow dust rose up, showing that the cattle were being driven homewards; occasional rocketing groups of parrots fled screaming across the gardens on their way to their roosts; and on the golden air was the smell from innumerable cooking fires. It was a peaceful and charming view, but the girl was bored and impatient, and longed to be able to go down and walk in the refreshing gardens below.

Suddenly she became aware that someone was standing behind. She turned sharply and faced the Maharajah, who had crept towards her.

"My lord, I did not hear your approach," she cried, her hands fluttering.

"You grow more lovely each time I come to you," he said seriously as he stood with one finger resting in the golden belt at his waist. "What lay in your mind, O Delectable One, as you stood before my city? Did you consider me, or love?"

The girl hesitated and lowered her head. To anyone else she would have replied instantly, being a candid, honest person.

"It was nothing, my lord," she said softly. "I did but watch the dying day."

"You dissimulate." He came close to the girl and placed an arm about her waist. "Your eyes were clouded when first I looked into them. Is aught amiss? Are there unfulfilled desires? For you I would grasp the stars."

"The day has been hot and long, my lord. I did but look on the gardens and wish to walk in their cool freshness." Having thus begun she grew bold. "Must I never leave these rooms? I am neither zenana bred, nor am I a caged bird, having always been free in my mother's house."

"Call upon all the Gods! What is this?" cried the Maharajah, pretending to misunderstand. "Already you are beating your tiny hands against these walls. So soon."

Lamai said nothing, but glanced up for an instant and there were tears in her eyes. She then spoke softly as if voicing her thoughts.

"I am weary with doing naught, my lord. In my home there were many things. My exercises, my learning, the study of the household, and the preparation of foods. Here I have sat idle and my spirit has become saddened."

"Ah hi, I did but tease," cried her companion hurriedly. "I understand and will see to the matter."

He left the balcony and from the inner room summoned an attendant to whom he gave several rapid orders. Returning again to Lamia he caught one of her hands in his own.

"We will now go into the gardens. I love them also and I will show what I have created."

The girl gave a little cry of pleasure and her fingers tightened on those of her companion.

"I can go to them when I wish?" she asked.

The Maharajah nodded and smiled.

"It shall be so. I will give the order."

Together they left the quarters and he led the way down deserted passages and a series of narrow and steep stairways until at last, after passing under a short tunnel in the palace walls, they came out into the gardens. First came broad walks under high, shady trees, and the borders thick with great bushes and many pleasing shrubs. Hand in hand they drifted along and Lamia started to chatter happily. On passing a great fountain of white jasmine in full bloom, the Maharajah stopped and broke off a long spray and gave it to the girl.

"It is sweet, but not sweeter than you," he said softly.

She smiled her thanks as she smelled the heavy perfume. Passing through a gateway in a solitary and ancient brick wall, the colour of glorious old rose, they came out into the open. Here, dominating a long and comparatively narrow space which sloped gently, was a small but exquisite octagonal, three-storied building of white marble and red sandstone. It was as delicate as a flower and seemed to have sprung out of the ground. Between the many open windows, each with a tiny balcony, were other windows filled with lace-like pierced marble, each a treasure in itself.

"That is the Palace of Breezes," explained the Maharajah. "There it is cool even in the great heat of high summer."

"Did you create it, my lord?"

"No, my grandfather conceived it."

"For his queen?"

Her companion smiled again and edged a little closer to the girl as they stood looking up at the building.

"It was for an offspring of joy; a Persian maiden who was slain with him after a great battle. The tale is worthy of us Rajputs and I will tell it to you. Come, see what filled my soul with joy to build."

They turned and walked a few paces down the slope to where a series of shallow ponds emptied into each other. They were square and each of pure, unveined white marble. The sides were plain, but the ponds themselves had been carved in deep relief. One rippled with lines of tiny waves which caused the gently flowing water to dance and sparkle. This overflowed into the next by means of three fan-shaped marble leaves which thinned the water to gossamer texture and it slid into a bottom where carved lotus flowers rioted. Each flower had been skilfully tinted in cream, or pink, or mauve, and even pale blue. The general effect was so lovely that Lamia cried out in delight. The next pond was larger and deeper, and in it were many strange and gorgeous fish which the Maharajah explained came from the Far East and had cost much money.

"You are pleased?" He glanced down at the girl's face.

"Beyond all measuring," cried the girl sincerely. "I would my mother could see this place, she loving all beautiful things. If my lord pleases, I will spend many hours here."

"Prettily said, Lamia," answered her companion, obviously delighted at her praise. "From my own mind came this creation, but the craftsmen were from the palace at Agra, loaned for this work. Even now they build the like in Fatepur Sikri for the Emperor's pleasure."

Moving onwards by narrow paths, edged with grass kept so short as to resemble green velvet, they passed lines of tall sheshum trees, the neem and pipal tree, each with waving, graceful grasses and flowers at its base. Now and again there was a flash of colour as the bee-eater birds flew from branch to branch.

The trees suddenly drew back, leaving an open space where a few peacocks walked and cried shrilly. Crossing the grass the trees closed in again over paths leading to small temples and secluded marble summer-houses. In the cool silence they approached one of the houses and, side by side, sat down on a marble seat. What her lover now said to Lamia was as old as history but fresher to her than the dawn.

When once again they became aware of time it was dark. Hand in hand they drifted back to the palace under a clear sky, surrounded by heady perfume from unseen night flowers.

CHAPTER VI

AFTER their love-making in the gardens, two days passed before the Maharajah left his zenana. All official business during the period

was held up and confusion and consternation grew as the hours went by—never before during the ruler's reign had such a thing occurred. The fierce old Diwan raged, the more so because he was powerless to do anything in the matter, and in the zenana itself nerves became frayed and tempers strained. Twice the Ranee Jadonji sent a message to her son, but each time the rebuffed messenger returned in fear to the irascible old lady, who roundly cursed him.

"Who is this hussy that has ensnared my son?" she demanded unceasingly, but no one was able to give an answer that satisfied her.

Papeeta was sent for and faced the old lady courageously.

"Well, chit, tell me concerning this woman," snapped the Ranee from her cushions, where she was sitting cross-legged, pulling at her water pipe. "Speak truly or I will have you beaten."

"O Great Queen, there is little in my mind regarding this girl," replied Papeeta with lowered head and downcast eyes. "She danced before our lord and has beauty rivalling that of the moon."

"She is naught but a common dancing girl, without sense, morals, or common decency," announced the Ranee fiercely. "My son has lost his senses."

"She has much charm," answered Papeeta softly.

"Charm!" The old lady spat out the word as if it were a deadly insult and thrust away her pipe. "A Daughter of Depravity. What is this I hear concerning her mother?"

"Little is known to me, O Queen. It is said she is a high-born lady of much wealth from the South."

Rumbling ominously the Ranee heaved herself to her feet and bore down upon the apprehensive girl.

"Speak the truth or I will pinch your buttocks until you scream," she hissed, her dark eyes glittering, and her be-ringed, clawlike hand held out in readiness to carry out her threat.

"Before all the gods I am entirely without knowledge," cried Papeeta. "She told me only concerning herself. Of her mother I know nothing."

"What did she say to you?"

The girl repeated all she could remember of what Lamia had said.

"So she is priest-ridden," announced the Ranee when Papeeta had finished. "I will look to this myself. Doubtless she has bewitched him. Go! Go, worthless, before I slap you."

The girl hurriedly and thankfully retired, only to be faced with an order for an appearance before the Diwan. This interview was less terrifying than the previous one and the girl, much to her secret

amusement, did nothing to appease the irate old gentleman, who cursed her by many strange gods.

When Ameyra heard from her spies what was taking place in the palace she smiled contentedly, prayed to the gods, and remained in her house to wait future developments. When the prince left his zenana the fact soon became known to her and she hurried off to her daughter. In the palace she was met with many black looks, and found that a double guard had been placed over the entrance to Lamia's quarters, and it was not without difficulty that she gained admittance.

Lamia greeted her mother rapturously.

"Is all well?" enquired Ameyra soberly, after returning her daughter's embraces.

"All is beyond the best of dreams," cried the girl. "He loves me and is as a god."

She then told her mother much, but not all, that had taken place.

"So he says you are wiser than many Brahmins. That is good," said Ameyra as she moved into the outer room and stood looking down over the city. "I have done what is within my power, but from now onwards all will lie in those small hands of yours. Remember in the days to come that a man is held more easily by a silken thread than a heavy chain of love. Give sparingly and demand nothing." She placed an arm about Lamia's waist as she leaned against her. "Take care also, O Sun of my Horizon, take care. There are hate, spite, and jealousy abroad."

"But we love each other, O Best of Mothers," cried the girl laughingly. "What else matters?"

"What else matters," echoed the older woman impatiently. "Much matters. Who overlooks your food? Who examines what you drink? Do you wish to die suddenly and painfully in the night, or to waste away like an unwatered flower? Do not forget that you, a stranger, have ensnared his heart, and there must be many who hate and fear you because of this thing. What of this Papeeta? Is she fully to be trusted?"

"She is as a dearly loved sister," cried Lamia indignantly. She then lifted her chin proudly. "You forget, my mother, that he loves me and if aught happened many would suffer grievously from his wrath."

Ameyra nodded gravely and changed the subject by asking many questions regarding the other inmates of the zenana. In due course Papeeta came in and she turned the questioning to her. Good humouredly the girl replied to enquiries about the food, and smiled when asked what was being said in the palace concerning the new favourite. She described her interview with the old Ranee so amusingly that both her listeners laughed heartily.

"There is also much whispering and curiosity among the senseless ones," she added. "All desire to see your face, Lamia. A hundred times a day I am asked, but I tell them to wait." Suddenly she became serious and turned to Ameyra. "It is in my mind that it were better if you did not come to this place. I heard my father say that the Diwan had no love for you. He is dangerous and powerful."

Ameyra nodded thoughtfully.

"Those are wise words. I have considered this thing also. I am as I am, and it were better so."

"You will not come? I shall not see you?" wailed Lamia in distress.

"For a little time it must be so, My Heart of Hearts. When the future becomes more clear then will I come here freely. Now we must walk carefully and do nothing to imperil what has been gained."

With this Lamia was forced to be content, but she wept when her mother went away.

The days slid by swiftly. Each evening Lamia was with her lover, either in the gardens or sitting on the balcony of her room. She sang to him; they played chess; and together discussed many and diverse things. They planned new works, and he taught her much about gardens and the art of them. Sometimes she danced and he never tired of seeing the tight-rope dance. One evening she received him with sparkling eyes.

"Ah ho, what has befallen, O Eye of Beauty?" he enquired, laughing. "I see in your eyes there is some surprise."

"My Beloved, you must guess."

"You have fashioned a new dance?"

Lamia shook her head gaily.

"You have found a new opening at the chess game?"

"No."

The Maharajah shook his head.

"Then I cannot guess it. Tell me."

"I have written a poem for you, telling of my thoughts when alone. Is that not skilful of me?"

"It is indeed. Read it that I may be enthralled."

"No, Best Beloved, I will sing it."

Running to fetch her stringed instrument she urged him to sit down beside her on the cushions in the inner room. He did so, and on glancing at the paper she held, gasped in amazement.

"By all the gods, it is Urdu, the new language the Emperor Akbar has conceived and ordered to be used. Where did you learn it?"

Lamia gurgled in high delight.

"My lord now sees that I am not lacking in learning. It was

thus. When first we come to my mother's house in this place there arrived a scribe from Agra. Hearing of the Emperor's order, my mother said I must learn the new speech. This man instructed me and within one moon I knew it all. After two moons I could write it also."

The Maharajah nodded his head in mock despair.

"For ever you are bewildering me. What else shall I find in that small head? Sing me this poem. Even I can read this new writing but slowly."

She plucked the strings and sang the composition written in high flown Urdu, which can be only roughly translated.

"The flame of my love burns like the noonday sun;
I am consumed, my soul is faint and dry.
My eyes are weary with watching.
Come to me, beloved, or I die.

The weary, endless night holds my wakeful soul;
Each minute an hour, each hour a lie.
My feet are sore with aimless tread.
Come to me, beloved, or I die.

The cold, unfriendly stars stretch out to snatch my prayer;
The well of hope runs dry.
My arms are wretched with emptiness.
Come to me, beloved, or I die.

The dawn comes sullen, rampant red with angry fear;
The anguished day is born awry.
My soul is wrenched from its sheath.
Beloved I die, I die.' "

The song died away and the girl, lowering her instrument, turned to glance at her lover. To her amazement tears stood in his eyes and he looked away and blinked several times.

"You are pleased?" she enquired doubtfully.

"You have melted my heart so that I cannot speak," he muttered at last. "It is sweeter than the music of the gods, but sad, and I would have you ever joyous."

Lamia clapped her hands with delight.

"I am now happy beyond understanding, although the poem is a poor thing. It was in my mind it is like an unpolished gem. Together we will polish it and make it worthy. What say you?"

"Sing it again. I could listen for ever."

The girl obeyed and by the time she had finished her companion had regained his composure. With heads close together they sat for a long time with Lamia discussing the work and suggesting new

and better words. The Maharajah smiled, watched her animated face, and agreed to every suggestion.

"Ho, you are useless," she cried at last. "You will give me no aid."

"Both captivating and delectable, it was perfect before," he answered. "Can you polish the sun, or whiten the moon? Come, let us go into the gardens and sit beside the lake. The day has been irksome and my spirit needs you and calm waters to soothe it."

"What has befallen?"

Her lover made a grimace and shrugged his slim shoulders.

"My mother and my wife soon depart for Benares for the Praying and the palace buzzes like a nest of bees. Always am I pestered with this or that. This is not fitting; that must be changed; why cannot this be done. Although my mother, she is something of an affliction."

Lamia giggled and put away her instrument.

"I understand, also having a strong-willed mother. Come, let us go and forget these things in our love."

Three days later the Maharajah had failed to come to her quarters, and realizing he was busy, Lamia went down to the gardens alone in the late afternoon. Seated on the rim of the lotus pond she was dressed in a thin, brocade dress of a pale sea-green with a cream sari draped over her satin-like hair. From beneath the hem of her dress peeped out the toe of a golden-threaded slipper.

She was watching with amusement the antics of a pair of male lizards on the path not far away battling for a dainty little female, who was viewing the fray as she turned her pointed green face first this way and then that as the battle progressed. The smaller of the two lizards was the bolder and the girl hoped he would win. He would dart in and give his enemy a sound thump with his whip-like tail, then break away before the larger lizard had time to retaliate. This was repeated several times, until at last the larger creature managed to get in a shrewd blow on its opponent's flanks that caused it to stagger.

Suddenly both lizards froze and then turned their heads to look at something. In a flash all three were gone and Lamia raised her head and saw the redoubtable old Ranee Jadonji coming swiftly towards her from the direction of the palace. She had heard so much of this queen, whose influence was felt in every part of the state, that the girl stared at her for several moments with a mixture of awe and interest.

Of small stature, the Ranee was wearing a magenta-coloured full dress with short sleeves and a puce sari draped over her thin, grey hair. Her oval face still showed traces of a once great beauty, in spite of the fact that it was now deeply wrinkled, not unlike a

dried apple. Her deep-set eyes were full of vitality, and although her reputation for harsh and domineering rule was a byword, her heart was kind and her charity great.

As the old lady drew near Lamia jumped to her feet and made a deep obeisance, accompanied by the usual fluttering of her hands. She halted a short distance from the girl and the two attendants followed suit. For some moments she appraised Lamia, who stood with a slightly bent head and modestly lowered eyes.

"Ah, it must be you who have ensnared my son and dulled his wits," observed the old lady severely.

"O Mother of Princes I am but the Thrice Born's slave. I am the dust beneath your slippers and utterly unworthy," replied Lamia, still with lowered eyes.

"Come close that I may look into your face, Shameless Wench." A faint twitching of the sunken lips might have indicated a smile.

The girl glided forward and the Ranee put out a skinny arm and raised her chin with a finger. She then nodded several times.

"I would that your virtue rivalled your looks," she observed less unpleasantly. "Who are you? From whence do you come to cast a shadow over my zenana so that he neglects his wife and is lacking in respect for me, his mother?"

Lamia unconsciously did a thing that helped her greatly. She raised her head and smiled.

"O Great Queen, my mother, the best of all mothers, brought me from the South so that I might find a husband among your race, who she says are the greatest of all men," she said clearly but softly. "Before I met the Heaven Born, who is your son, never had I spoken with other than greybeards and priests. I am unversed in love as a little child."

The Ranee snorted and then nodded as she flung back one side of her sari.

"Walk with me, child. Tell me of these priests and why you dance like a common slut," she commanded.

Side by side they walked slowly down to the open space beyond the last pond, and Lamia, with growing confidence, told her companion much of her previous life, but she remembered her mother's urgent warning to say nothing about her horoscope.

The Ranee had already heard the details of Lamia's first appearance at the durbar and the commotion caused by Ameyra's subsequent behaviour. She was, in consequence, aware that the girl was telling the truth; besides, she had vast experience of court intrigue and could recognize the truth instantly when she heard it.

"Enough, child," she said when Lamia paused. "I understand. This shameless mother of yours is not without wisdom in seeking the favour of princes. I am not displeased. It is better that my son should settle to one flower than flit from one foul weed to another. All men are alike where love is concerned, being greedy, unwhipped boys."

At this point they reached the far side of the open space and turned about. As they did so both saw the Maharajah hurrying towards them with a comical expression of dismay on his face, showing clearly his alarm that Lamia should have been left alone in the company of his mother.

"They told me you were in the gardens, Beloved," he said breathlessly to Lamia.

"Did they also say that I walked here?" enquired his mother sardonically. "I see you lack breath, my son. In spite of you I have at last met this wench of yours."

"Is she not lovelier than the rose?" asked her son almost pleadingly.

"She does not lack charm, although to me in my youth as a peahen to a peacock."

"No one will deny this thing," replied the Maharajah, quickly and tactfully.

"Well said." The old lady nodded approvingly. "What matters more than beauty is that she does not lack intelligence as do those dancing girls who foul the zenana. Also I see she has a sweet and modest nature. Because of these things I will rest content. I make one condition."

"What is it?" He moved to Lamia's side, fully prepared to do battle for her sake.

"It is that you drive out instantly all the low-born, virtueless women from the zenana so that peace and contentment may reign again."

The Maharajah gasped with astonishment, hesitated, and then laughed.

"It shall be as you wish, my mother, but they will cause a great uproar, a wailing that will reach to the end of my kingdom," he replied doubtfully.

"What care I? They have ever been vexatious beyond all expression. Daughters of Shame! Midan Scum that they are."

"What say you, Lamia?" Her lover turned to the girl at his side and smiled at her.

"My lord, it is wise to listen to the wisdom of one's mother," she answered demurely.

"Well said, girl. Now, my son, there is one other little matter to be settled between us," announced the Ranees briskly, as her eyes glittered. "They tell me you have given your virtuous wife and me, your aged mother, but fifty warriors to guard us on the journey to Benares. What means this? Am I an all-such, a woman of no account, that this indignity should blacken my face?" The old lady's voice rose shrilly with her indignation. "In the past it was never thus. Two hundred marched with me. It is in my mind that your father's ashes will rise up in wrath like a whirlwind about your head."

The Maharajah sighed. He had been expecting this outburst and had avoided his mother.

"It is not possible to send more at this time. Were it not for war, and rumours of war, you should have had three hundred," he said hastily.

"War!" exclaimed the old lady much alarmed. "What is this? Why was I not informed?"

"Have no fear. It is far from where you journey across Hindustan. Not long since the Emperor sent saying he was going into the Far South to quell the rebels there. He desires that I accompany him, or send men to his aid. Because of this I must hold all in readiness."

"What have we to do with the South?" demanded the Ranee angrily. "For ever are we draining our kingdom for distant wars. Not less than one hundred will I have. The Emperor can seek men of his own faith to fight his battles. He is growing to be as quarrelsome as his father, the Emperor Humayun."

It was then that a sudden idea occurred to the Maharajah, and he hastily suppressed a smile.

"It is now I who will make a condition, my mother," he said with great firmness.

The old lady glanced shrewdly at her son.

"What devilry do you meditate upon during my absence?"

"None, O Eye of Beauty," he answered blandly.

"Tell me of the condition."

"If I give you one hundred warriors for the guard, thereby risking his displeasure, you shall permit me now to visit the Fort and take my rights, and without great argument and much windy talk."

It was now the Ranee's turn to show astonishment, and she did so in no uncertain manner.

"It is for her that you would do this thing, Shameless." She turned fiercely upon Lamia. "It was you, Sly Chit, who put this thought into his mind."

The girl's bewildered face showed clearly her innocence.

"O Queen, I know nothing of this matter," she replied hastily.

"This is entirely without sense," exclaimed her lover indignantly.

"She indeed knows nothing."

"It is then for her; I guessed it. The very hills will fall and crush us for very amazement," hissed the old lady. "Never has the gift been made to a 'light of love.' Never will I agree."

Her son smiled and nodded as he pointed to the Palace of Breezes, which they were now nearing.

"It is in my mind he who built that did this very thing and the hills remained unmoved," he observed lightly.

This confounded the old lady, who was at a loss for words, and it was some time before she spoke, but when she did so she showed her strength of character by making up her mind at once.

"One hundred and twenty-five," she said firmly.

"It shall be so."

"And they in the zenana shall depart to-morrow?"

"In the first light of dawn." The Maharajah smiled and then winked at Lamia.

"Good, very good. I say no more, but remember, my son, the ancient law; once only in your lifetime can you visit the Fort. Now I go."

The old lady hurried forward, was joined by her attendants, and then vanished towards the palace, leaving the lovers to sit down on the edge of the nearest pond.

"I am confused," cried the girl, catching her companion's arm as they sat side by side. "What did she mean? I am guiltless."

"Utterly, Pretty One. This thought to visit the Fort came into my mind and I made good use of it."

"Of what? You talk in riddles, my lord."

"The story is a long one, but I will tell it briefly. In the time of the Emperor Chandragupta, many hundreds of years ago, one of my ancestors had been fighting in the Far North. Before he died he came down out of the great northern passes with a vast treasure. Some *kos* from this city lies Salim, the old city, and behind it on a high hill is a fort. Deep down in this fort the great treasure was stored and since that time it has been guarded by a clan of brigands."

"Brigands?" exclaimed the girl, thunderstruck.

"Yes, robbers and thieves, who have served my family well. He who first put them in authority was wise beyond many, saying set thieves to catch thieves. Only the chief of the clan and his eldest son know the secret leading to the underground chambers. Each ruler of Rajilal is allowed once in his lifetime to visit and inspect the treasure, and on departure to take away one piece for himself. Now is all made clear to you?"

"Yes, but why should your mother say I put this thought to visit the fort into your mind?"

"O Simple One, because that chosen by me would be a gift to you."

Lamia's eyes became round with wonder and her breath came more quickly.

"For me, my lord? Never! Such a gift is for your wife, not such as I. It is not possible."

"But it delights my heart that it should be so. When they have gone on the journey we will go to Salim together. Say no more. It is my wish." Her lover's voice was firm and he changed the subject. "Are you not pleased that the dancing girls leave the zenana?"

"Yes, but I am afraid. It is certain all will declare I have caused this thing. Because of it many will hate me and I would that they should love me."

"It shall become known that it is I, and I alone, who give the

order," replied the Maharajah smiling. "They are all utterly without worth."

"Nevertheless it will be said that I whispered in your ear."

"It is of no account."

"Where will they go? What will they do?" asked the girl, glancing up at her lover with troubled eyes.

He laughed as he put an arm about her waist.

"Do not trouble your mind with these things. There are a hundred houses in the city to which they will bring joy, and they will live in great contentment. Let us now talk of other things. What of your bewitching little nose? What of your forehead which resembles the new moon? Your eyes, how like the gazelle's they are."

Lamia's mood, however, was subdued and she did not respond as she would normally have done. She wished she could go to her mother and discuss the situation with her.

Later that evening when in her rooms again she confided in Papeeta, who listened and was profoundly astonished.

"Ah hi, I understand why the old Ranee was so sweet-tempered. There is as yet no news of this thing, but it is good. Now there will be peace for the remainder of us."

"What of me, Papeeta? Surely they will hate me," said Lamia with tears standing in her eyes. "Many will say evil things of me."

"They are less than the leaves that fall from the trees in our courtyards," announced the girl quickly and scornfully. "Who cares for such as they? Your heart is too soft, Lamia." She paused and then laughed. "There will be much lamentation and it will be sweet music in my ears."

That night Lamia slept uneasily and her dreams were not pleasant.

Early the following morning the whole palace, from the double gateway to the depths of the zenana was as clamorous and excited as if the walls were being attacked. In the zenana there was pandemonium, the Maharajah's order for the evacuation of the dancing girls having been given out at very short notice. Interspersed with bewailings, moanings, whimperings, and even screams, palace servants stormed as they urged the hostile, angry females to pack instantly for departure. The Maharajah, in his rooms, heard the din and smiled; Lamia wept; while the Ranee Jadonji leapt into the fray, using a whip across the backs of those girls who showed defiance and were laggardly in their packing.

In the lower and main courtyard was a collection of bullock carts hastily gathered together from the city, and on to them was piled an amazing confusion of bundles and boxes. As each laden cart rumbled out of the gate with one or more veiled females perched disconsolately on their belongings, the lounging soldiers flung coarse jests at them.

When the last cart had gone, a comparative peace reigned once more; although many people were gravely disturbed. Courtiers

asked themselves what this drastic action meant; doubtless it was the work of the new favourite. What caused many an anxious frown was the fact that she seemed to have begun to use her influence with dramatic suddenness. The Diwan, however, showed nothing of what he felt, but he was sure that the dismissal of the girls was the work, not so much of Lamia as of her mother. How he hated her. To have watched this woman being ground to death beneath the forefeet of an elephant would have given him exquisite pleasure; in the meantime he would consider how he might turn the incident to his own use.

Calm did not remain for long in the palace, because later in the day final preparations for the departure the next morning of the Ranee Jadonji and the Maharanee Aman for Benares, were set in motion. These preparations continued all through the night with the maximum amount of noise and confusion to reach a hectic and tumultuous conclusion shortly before dawn. Carts, palanquins, purdah carriages, horses, donkeys, and hordes of officials and servants seethed together in what appeared to be aimless confusion. After many false starts, and a spate of last orders and counter orders, in which the old Ranee had shrieked herself into a state of hoarseness, the long and rabble-like procession set out with the Maharajah riding beside his mother's and his wife's elaborate purdah carriage. He escorted them to the frontier of the state, where after bidding them a long and formal farewell he turned his horse, and with his guard, galloped back to Rajigarh.

"Now there will be a period of delicious calmness," he said to a smiling Lamia that evening.

"How long will they be absent?" she enquired.

"Two moons, I hope. Now, My Life's Desire, let us forget them. I am weary beyond measure and my mind is confused and heated by the events of this day."

CHAPTER VII

A FEW days after the departure of the two principal occupants of the zenana, it was partially deserted, and Lamia insisted upon being given more freedom. Often alone, but sometimes accompanied by Papeeta, she wandered about the maze of passages, peeping into rooms, examining tiny courtyards, and spending a long time during the mornings listening to the Maharajah as he sat in an open durbar hall giving public audiences. A finely pierced marble screen, placed above where he sat, enabled her to look down and hear all of what was taking place. It was from behind this screen that the Ranee Jadonji normally watched and listened and so kept her finger on the pulse of state affairs.

Lamia found this pastime doubly useful. It gave her a definite and interesting occupation and, what was more important, it afforded fresh topics of conversation with her lover when he came to see her in the evenings. They discussed, and even argued, over certain matters, and before long he found himself asking the girl's advice on a variety of subjects. Perhaps it was an involved petition; a matrimonial tangle; a report from a distant and important landowner; or even a plea against a possible miscarriage of justice. When the Maharajah enquired what she thought of this, or that, she would wrinkle up her brows in a delicious manner and assume a pose of great wisdom and deep concentration before delivering her opinion.

Ameyra heard of these things when she went to visit her daughter and was unstinted in her praise.

"Never was there such a daughter," she exclaimed when told of an answer given on a question of a dispute over water rights. "Thus is the love of a clever man forged into an unbreakable chain, but see to it, my daughter, that you do not become pert or overbearing. Watch his face and sift his thoughts. If his mind is fixed do not strive to change it, but give a soft and welcome answer. Remember that often he does not need your advice, but speaks to you because this aids his thought. Give answer only when he asks for it twice; thus shall the path remain smooth."

Ameyra had not shared Lamia's fears regarding the dismissal of the dancing girls, but had laughed lightly and turned to what she considered to be a far more important subject.

"Is he a wine-bibber, as is said in the bazaars?" she asked as they stood on the balcony one hot afternoon.

"Only once has he drunk deeply in my presence," replied Lamia smiling. "That was on the night of the day when his wife and mother departed on their journey."

"What befell?"

"I sang, and danced, and read to him as he drank much wine, and then he fell asleep with his head in my lap like a small child. He has in him much of the boy."

"He was not violent or quarrelsome?"

"No, he laughed much and wagged his head thus." The girl imitated the Maharajah's sleepy noddings so cleverly that her mother was amused.

"Thank the gods. I shall sleep more easily for this knowledge."

After her mother had gone, Lamia walked in the gardens with her lover and he told her that the trip to Salim would be made the following morning before the heat became unpleasant.

As the first light of dawn tinted the clouds in the eastern sky Lamia was awakened, took her bath, ate some breakfast, and then aided by Papeeta, dressed herself with unusual care. When it came to putting on a half veil the girl objected.

"I shall wear no veil," she announced.

"No veil," cried Papeeta, aghast. "He would never permit such shamelessness. You have lost your senses with excitement."

"We spoke concerning it last night and he laughed, saying it should be as I wished," replied Lamia proudly.

"Will you not be confused? Will not all the low and the lewd look upon you?" cried the shocked girl. "I should die of shame."

"I am as I am," replied Lamia, unconsciously using one of her mother's favourite expressions.

Her companion shrugged her shoulders good naturedly and went to fetch jewellery from the pocket in the wall, which was now well filled. No sooner had suitable pieces been selected than an aged dame came in to announce that the elephants were waiting.

On the open space outside the main gateway of the palace nine elephants were kneeling, waiting to carry the Maharajah and his suite. The leading beast was of unusual size and a magnificent sight. The great forehead and thick trunk were gaudily painted with scroll designs, and the shortened tusks were banded with silver and capped with gold. Draped across the back was a great yellow and green canopy, above which was an elaborate silver howdah, and in front sat the mahout holding his goad and gripping with his legs behind the vast ears.

The Maharajah, in full ceremonial dress and glittering with jewels, stood beside the howdah waiting for Lamia, and about him was his suite. There was an audible gasp from the assembled officials and courtiers when the girl came through the gateway and smiled gaily at them as they parted hurriedly to make a passage for her. Stepping forward, the Maharajah at once took her hand and assisted her to step into the howdah. He then climbed in himself and they sat down, side by side and cross-legged, on vast, soft cushions. As soon as the upheaval caused by the elephant getting to its feet had subsided, Lamia turned and gazed with wide eyes at her lover's magnificence and then smiled a little doubtfully.

"You are not displeased, Beloved, that I come thus unveiled?"

"No. Now my people will gaze on your loveliness and stand amazed," he replied quickly. "Sitting beside me thus, all will know that the sun has found its moon."

Lamia laughed happily and clapped her hands.

"Prettily said, my lord. All my life I shall remember this day. I tremble with excitement and anticipation."

With slow and stately tread the elephants moved down the slope and began to amble through the city. The more narrow streets had been cleared, but the wider ones were packed with people who shouted and acclaimed their ruler. Lamia stared down from her lofty position and chattered as she pointed out this or that which caught her attention.

"See, they wave and shout. They are pleased and love you," she cried, as they moved through a small and densely packed square.

The Maharajah smiled and nodded as he watched her animated

face and enjoyed her childish enthusiasm. As they neared the main exit gate there was nearly a tragic incident, and Lamia seeing it, cried out in alarm. A small, brown, pot-bellied fragment of humanity, about two feet high, suddenly darted out into the middle of the roadway almost under the leading elephant's feet. There followed a high-pitched scream and the infant's mother dashed forward, stretched out a thin arm, and snatched her offspring out of harm's way. The girl, who had been leaning over the edge of the howdah, sighed with relief and then smiled at the volume of lamentation roared out by the small thing as it was spanked and chided by its parent. With animation she explained what had occurred to her lover as she dropped back on to her cushion, and so they passed out of the city to the great open space beyond.

Skirting the high, red city wall the procession turned left and made its way through an ancient burial ground and so into comparatively open country. The first two miles was a curious neighbourhood. For a considerable depth on either side of the road it was lined with low jungle, out of which a dead city reared its mouldering bones. Partly ruined temples, large houses, small shrines, and undefinable walls gave the area an atmosphere that was depressing. Between the ruins peasants cultivated small plots of land, and where well-to-do inhabitants had lived monkeys rioted, and plantains grew beside the doorways. The Maharajah explained that this city has been given up long ago because it could not be defended and had twice been sacked.

Leaving the city behind the road sloped upwards and entered a narrow, gorge-like strip of country where trees grew thinly on the brown hillsides, and Lamia was pointed out the spots where the prince went out to hunt the tiger and other game. On reaching the brow of a hill the road suddenly ran gently into a wide valley on either side of which were high, wooded hills. Towards the far end of the valley was the deserted palace of Salim perched on the left-hand slope, where it overlooked a large partly dried up lake. As they drew near, the Maharajah pointed out the Fort, situated behind the palace and on the top of a very high hill. Connecting the Fort with the palace, a distance of two miles, was a wide, substantial wall which wound upwards across the landscape like some great snake.

While the ruler of Rajilal approached along the valley, Tomar, the head of the clan which guarded the treasure in the Fort, had just bathed himself, and swiftly changing his wet and clinging dhoti for a dry one he went up on to the broad wall of the Fort. Shaking out his long, damp, shining hair so that it might dry the quicker in the hot sunshine, he gazed down into the valley and seeing the procession was filled with pride. This was to be the greatest day of his life.

Tomar was as shrivelled, as wrinkled, and as thin as a starved cow, but from his rumpled face, with its thin line of grey, drooping

moustache, there looked out a pair of lively, black eyes in whose depths was a curious, rather unpleasant light: it was not unlike that seen in the eyes of a cat sitting beyond the reach of a barking dog, or a fanatic when vigorously opposed.

Forty-three years before, he had, as a child of seven, stood beside his father and looked down at the valley, as he was now doing. Turning about he called into the courtyard many feet below.

"Ho, Samarad, my son. Come here to me on the wall."

At the sound of the summons his wife came out of the blackness of a doorway, pushing before her a child of three years of age.

"Your father calls you, my son. Go to him," she said, leading the boy to the foot of the steps.

The child obediently crawled up the steep, high steps, and running across stood beside his father, who caught him by the hand. Normally the child wore only a ridiculously short shirt which reached down over his melon-like stomach as far as the navel, but he was now clad in new, baggy, white trousers and a fine linen shirt, while on his head was a tiny, round, stiff hat of purple velvet heavily embroidered with gold thread and coloured silks. His eyes were blackened, his tiny finger-nails were stained with bright red henna, and round his neck was a silver bead necklet.

Tomar lifted his son and sat him down on the stone balustrade, holding him with one arm about his waist.

"See, my son, already they gather." He pointed down to the elephants on the road. "Soon he will come."

Samarad nodded his tiny head vigorously and pointed with a fat hand to the old palace below.

"As was the promise, my son," said Tomar gravely, "you shall hear the story, so that when the time comes and I have gone to the burning ghat, you shall perform the honour which will be mine to-day. Here then is the tale, and it is a wondrous one.

"In days long ago when this was the home of the prince and all had been newly built, there was one who ruled and was a mighty warrior. With an army, he went into the Far North across the great desert into the land where all men are devils but own great wealth. After many moons he returned, and with him came a treasure so great that no man could value its worth.

"Our people, who lived in these hills, were loved by that prince because of their courage and loyalty. As is known to you, my son, we are robbers, and sons of robbers, and begetters of robbers, but that prince was wiser than many Brahmins, saying to himself, 'Robbers make the best guards when loyalty is proved.' And so, in those far distant days, the treasure was hidden deep in this fort and our people were brought to watch over it. It has been thus for years past all counting, but only I, Tomar, your father, know the secret, and when you have become a man to be chief after me

I will take you to it so that you may also learn it. Because of these things we are held in much honour in the land, all men marvelling when the matter is talked of in the great bazaars."

Little Samarad, who had listened with eyes as wide and round as ripe sloes, turned and looked at his father's face.

"My father, will this honour come also to me?"

"Surely, my son, if your honesty and loyalty to him be proved and sure. But the secret is a great one, heavier to carry than iron chains about the neck."

"He comes to-day to see the treasure?" enquired the child in awed tones.

"Yes, in the cool of the evening he will come, and I shall blindfold him and lead him to the place so that he may see that all is in order and take away one piece, as is the custom. Only once in his lifetime may this be so. If the gods be kind you shall so lead his son, and your son his son. But remember, your worth must be proved so that the honour of our people is preserved."

Lifting the child down, Tomar carried him into the courtyard and handed him over to his mother.

The fort was now a scene of much activity in spite of the great heat, all the members of the clan busily preparing to receive their ruler. The great courtyard, surrounded by verandahs, rooms and dark passageways, was being swept and tidied, and the windlass of the well at one end creaked and whined continuously.

In the small walled-garden outside the main gateway in which grew flowering shrubs, lemon trees heavy with fruit, and other plants, many of the wives were busy weeding the paths and removing dead vegetation. Preparations were also being rushed forward in the old palace below, which was bursting into life once again. Rooms were being made ready, and food cooked, because the Maharajah was to spend the night there.

The valley was flooded with soft golden light and a breeze stirred the heavy air as the procession set out that evening from the palace along the uneven top of the great wall leading to the fort. The Maharajah, with Lamia, now rode on one of the smaller state elephants, and behind him, on foot, came the stream of courtiers, officials and servants. Slowly the gorgeously-clad throng toiled upwards until at last the ruler's elephant knelt down before the outer gate.

The Maharajah at once dismounted and was greeted by Tomar, carrying his ancient, bared sword of office, who came forward and made obeisance before his prince. As was the custom no one but the members of the guarding clan and the ruler were permitted to enter the fort before the ceremony was completed.

Tomar led the way into the courtyard, where they passed between two lines of clansmen and so to a small room of the right and at the far end. Here, alone with Tomar, the Maharajah allowed his eyes to be bandaged with a piece of purple and delicately-scented

silk, and Tomar's fingers trembled so much that he found difficulty in tying the knot behind the prince's head.

When Tomar, holding the Maharajah by the hand, led him out into the courtyard it was empty and, moving across to the far side, they passed through a doorway and descended into the earth far below the fort. Without light but with sure footsteps the prince was led down through endless, branching, winding passageways until at last the treasure-chamber was reached. No word had been spoken during the journey and, still in silence, Tomar lighted the two lamps that he carried and held them aloft. Their light showed a roughly hewn chamber about thirty feet by twenty in which was stowed the famous treasure from the North.

"Look well, my lord," said Tomar softly as he removed the bandage. "Never again will your eyes see this sight. As is ordained, take one piece to be your own. As the Heaven Born can see, I and my people have preserved our honour and served your house faithfully."

The Maharajah nodded as he stood for a short while gazing about in wonderment. He then began to move about the chamber with Tomar close at hand holding the lamps. Stacked so that each was instantly apparent were a great number of precious objects. There were heavily embossed and gem-crusted flagons, cups, bowls and dishes of dull gold; the necklaces, anklets, ear-rings, head ornaments, belts, strange figures of men and beasts, spurs, writing implements and pots, were mainly of pure gold and some so heavily jewelled that their settings could scarcely be distinguished. Stacked upright were many swords with hilts of gold, rock crystal, ivory, agate and jade, and their scabbards were of equal magnificence. At the far end were low boxes which Tomar threw open to show that they contained either gold coins, jewels, or loose gems.

For a long time the Maharajah wandered to and fro picking up object after object until at last Tomar grew impatient.

"The hour grows late, my lord," he said. "Will the Thrice Born make his choice?"

The Maharajah nodded, and striding across to one of the boxes he picked up a cunningly fashioned necklace of diamonds, emeralds, and rubies set in rows. As a pendant there hung an oval sapphire, the size of a peach stone. Holding it close to the light of the lamps he carefully examined the stones and saw that they were flawless.

"I will take this. Let us go," he said, slipping the necklace into a pocket.

"My lord has indeed chosen wisely," said Tomar as he refixed the bandage. "Doubtless she will be enchanted."

When they reached the courtyard and the bandage was removed, the Maharajah shook himself and blinked.

"Your honour has been well and brightly kept, Tomar," he said, smiling. "There being no fee what request have you to make so that I may grant it?"

"One only, Huzoor. It is that you will take my son in your arms and hold him aloft before my people, proclaiming him chief and guardian after me."

"It shall be done."

They left the small room, and as they did so the Maharajah caught the old man's right hand and held it in his own as they crossed the courtyard. This honour was almost too much for Tomar, who shivered and trembled with pride and exaltation. On nearing the gate the clan, which had been waiting for this moment, dashed inside in a compact body, yelling and waving their arms with delight. With mock severity their chief drove them off, but they followed behind like a pack of eager dogs.

Outside the gate the waiting courtiers and officials on hearing the shouting hurriedly formed up in a large semi-circle on the open space. When the Maharajah appeared, Lamia, who had left the howdah and had been sitting on a low wall, jumped to her feet and hastened towards him.

"Is all well, my lord?" she enquired anxiously. "You were so long gone that I grew afraid."

Her lover smiled and nodded as he let go of Tomar's hand and drew the girl close. Without speaking he then did a thing never before seen, and which caused the more staid and old-fashioned noblemen present to suck in their breath and shake their heads disapprovingly. Taking the necklace from his pocket the Maharajah turned Lamia so that she faced the crowd and then, slowly and with great deliberation, he fastened the jewel about her neck. She gazed down at it in stunned amazement, while a murmur of admiration rose up from those watching. As if to prevent her from voicing her thanks in public he hurriedly moved the girl aside and turned to the chief.

"Where is your son that I may hold him in my arms and pronounce him chief after you?" he asked in a loud voice.

The old man grinned and beckoned Samarad, who had been standing before his mother some distance away. The woman bent down, said something to her son and pushed him gently forward. The child ran forward a few paces and then paused as he stared up at his waiting prince. The tiny face then puckered up, his mouth opened, and he gasped. Turning about Samarad ran back to his mother roaring his fright and protest, while everyone present either smiled or laughed. Lamia now came to the rescue as she moved lightly towards the child, and picking him up in her arms she whispered comforting words to him. The yells promptly died away and wriggling in the girl's arms the child looked over her shoulder at his mother, who nodded encouragingly.

"Give him to me, Lamia," said the Maharajah holding out his hands.

The girl attempted to do so but the child clung to her.

"Go to him, Littlest," she said softly. "There is no harm, only great honour."

"No! Never! He affrights me," announced Samarad vigorously. Tomar now took a hand in the little scene.

"O Timid as a Mouse," he cried, taking his son from Lamia. "You bring shame to me by behaving thus. Never will you be chief. It was in my mind that you were more brave than the tigers in these hills."

The child now permitted his prince to take him and to hold him up under the armpits before the silent crowd.

"Behold the son of Tomar, Guardian of the Treasure. He, in his turn, shall be chief of the clan and guardian. Our heart is soft towards his father, whose honour, and whose people's honour, shines bright as the full moon," announced the Maharajah lowering the child and holding him in his arms.

Samarad, his round cap now set at a rakish angle on his shaven head, turned and looked into the Maharajah's face for a moment.

"Yes, Huzoor, I will be chief. No longer do I fear," he said, and then turned and pointed a fat hand at Lamia. "I like her. Is she your wife?"

"No, O Bold One," replied the Maharajah quickly. "Do you know what befalls little boys who ask too many questions?"

"No, it is not in my mind. What befalls?" asked the child, wide-eyed.

"They become eaten up with their curiosity so that only their toes remain. Go back to your mother."

Samarad was set on his feet and rushed back and hid his face in his mother's skirts. This was the signal for the gathering to break up and the return journey began at once. Beside her lover in the small howdah, Lamia leaned her head against his shoulder and sighed.

"Why do you sigh thus?" he enquired softly.

"I would that it had been our son that you held in your arms. My heart stood still as I watched."

"It shall be so if the gods are kind. Be not impatient. What think you of the jewel?"

"It is so lovely that my mind cannot wholly grasp it," answered the girl as she fingered the pendant. She then paused for a moment and stared into her companion's face. "Why did you make the gift before them? It was in my mind that you would have given it to me in secret."

"There was reason. Tongues that wag in the palace, as I know well, will now become silent."

The girl started and her face became sad as she clasped her hands together.

"The Diwan. He has no love for me," she announced. "I have heard, and to-day I saw him regarding me with disfavour. His eyes make me shiver, Beloved."

The Maharajah laughed lightly.

"It is of no account, although indeed he has no love for your mother because he is an old tiger and she nipped his tail. Let us forget the loose-tongued and think of pleasant things. To-morrow we will go in a boat on the lake, and also I will fish and you shall stand beside me and lure the fat ones to my hook."

The Maharajah was correct in his assumption that Lamia's public appearance beside him, and the open presentation of the necklace would tie loose tongues and stifle court intrigue. News of what had taken place at the Fort soon reached Rajigarh, where it became the chief topic of conversation and public opinion was firmly in favour of the ruler's action. The people felt their prince had taken them into his confidence and the thought pleased them. In the palace, from the Diwan down to the newest and most lowly sweeper, all clearly realized that from now onwards Lamia was a person of importance who might even become a power behind the throne as the years passed. Lamia's influence would naturally be curbed while the old Ranee still lived, but at her death anything might happen, and the numerous sychophants were quick to grasp this fact.

Ameyra rejoiced and in doing so forgot the warning of the old Jain priest at her daughter's naming. To her it now seemed that the goal was in sight, but Fate, which was to be aided by the vindictive old Diwan, was preparing a strange drama in which Lamia was to play the leading part.

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The court spent that night in the old palace where Lamia was shown much of its past glories. The following morning the Maharajah suddenly decided to go hunting in the nearby hills, so that the girl returned to the city alone and the boating expedition was postponed.

"How went the hunt?" she enquired, when her lover, still in his hunting clothes, came to visit her at sundown.

"Well, very well," he exclaimed, obviously pleased with himself. "A fine tigress fell to my spear. See, she tore this as she reared to strike." Lifting his long coat he showed a jagged tear in his white jodhpurs below the knee.

"You Beloved! What of you? You were unharmed?" cried the girl in acute alarm.

"Yes, she did but rip the cloth and tear a little skin. All cried out in fear at that time, but loudly acclaimed me when the tigress fell dead beside my horse."

"It was indeed well done. Take me that I may see this kill," demanded the girl eagerly.

Smiling, the Maharajah led the way to an inner courtyard where the great beast lay outstretched on its side, with the spear still protruding from its throat.

"Ah hi, you are indeed a mighty hunter," cried Lamia, looking down at the great paws. "I am swollen with pride."

Her companion grinned, and bending down lifted one of the forefeet and exposed the huge claws.

"How fearful they are," observed the girl shuddering. She then paused as an idea occurred to her. "Have them taken and fashioned into a necklace, Beloved," she suggested. "I will wear it and value it above all."

"An excellent thought. It shall be done." Turning to a nearby official he gave an order.

Later that evening, after he had bathed and eaten, the Maharajah again went to Lamia's rooms, where he found her sitting on the balcony watching a nearly full moon sail up into a clear sky.

"You are not weary?" she enquired, turning her head and smiling up at him as he approached carrying two cushions.

"No, O Spring of Enchantment. Were I exhausted in a desert the sight of you would refresh me."

He sat down on the cushions and the girl leaned contentedly against him as he put an arm about her.

"You are happy?" he asked glancing down at her lovely face and half-closed eyes.

"Need you enquire, Light of my Existence? My heart is over full and my soul weeps for those who do not know such bliss. One thought, however, saddens me a little.

"Tell it to me that I may banish this evil."

"It is that you must leave me so often. I know there is much to be done, but it comes to my mind that I am like a parrot in its cage."

Her lover sighed and stroked the girl's satin-smooth hair.

"It is the same for all. I have read much and talked with many wise men. All cry out that they are imprisoned and their souls struggle to be free. No one, not even such as I, can live as I wish. To be ever seeking amusement is the father of fifty devils and quickly breeds discontent. If I were forever lolling at your side you would soon sicken of me."

"Never!" replied the girl sitting upright. "It is true that you must work and rule your people, but I would that I were by your side. When you are absent my heart is as a dried up well." The girl frowned and wrinkled her nose. "It is sometimes in my mind to wish I were a man. I have the spirit of a man, and yet always I must sit and watch, and play no part. It was even thus in my mother's house. She talked to men as a man and they listened to her, but never could I say one word."

"You are but a child and these are worthless thoughts, O Lovely One. What would you do?" enquired the Maharajah, amused by this new mood.

"I would sit at your side and assist in judging men and matters. I would handle them as pieces in the game of chess are handled.

I would sharpen my mind against their own as a sword is prepared on the stone. When I listened, before we went to the Fort, to that man standing before you in the durbar hall it seemed your heart was over-soft towards him. His mind is evil and his eyes those of the snake."

This was an entirely fresh side of Lamia's character and her companion started and stared at her in astonishment.

"That man was my cousin's wife's brother," he said sharply. "You would have had me treat him as if of no consequence?"

"It matters not if he were your wife's brother," answered the girl firmly. "A dangerous animal must be tied and made to tremble at your frown."

The Maharajah chuckled and rubbed his chin with his free hand.

"So said my Diwan, who was much enraged."

"What did he say?"

"Many things, O Wise One, but I laughed and said he was an old tiger with a sore tooth and he departed muttering to himself."

A long pause followed, during which the couple sat staring over the city which had now become a fantastic, stippled mass in the bright moonlight. When the Maharajah spoke again he changed the topic of conversation, but later that night remembered what Lamia had said and smiled to himself as if he had come to some decision.

CHAPTER VIII

THE lake on the left of the palace hill was made by a high, broad bund thrown up several hundred years previously, and the water was intended to act as an emergency reservoir in times of drought. The bund, which spanned the narrow, shallow valley, formed a sheet of water a mile in length, but which narrowed at its far end to a hundred and fifty yards.

The lake was set amid gently sloping wooded hills and on the western side a few white houses were visible in the dark trees. From the palace gardens meandering walks under shady trees and flowering shrubs led to the top of the bund, where a marble-paved and balustraded promenade ran for most of its length. At the rear was a large rectangular, single-storied building with large doors where the women of the zenana and the court assembled to refresh themselves after the heat of the day. At such times many forms of amusement took place including fishing, banquets, play acting, and variety turns of all kinds.

The balustrade, with its slim marble railings, dropped sheer to the water's edge where large fish swam lazily in the clear depths. Three small domed piers jutted out at intervals, and it was from these

that the Maharajah and his guests fished. Flights of shallow steps also led down to the water, and at the far end of the bund there was an overflow where the palace laundry was dealt with.

One evening, Lamia and the Maharajah went up on to the bund from where they set out in a flat-bottomed boat manned by a young, good-looking oarsman who worked his oars in the reverse manner as he sat with his back towards the prince. The sun was setting behind the western hills and a glorious sunset flamed over the purple slopes. Across the unrippled water came faint breezes carrying exotic scents, and also traces of acrid smoke from fires which cooked the evening meals on the shore.

On reaching the far end of the lake where it narrowed to an inlet, the couple stepped ashore into a tiny garden where there was a shrine to Ganesh, the Elephant God. Here all was peace and the setting made for romance. The sides of the inlet were low and meadow-like, and on the right a number of sleek cows were being gathered together by a small boy whose shouts and urgings came not unmusically on the still, golden air. A grass-grown path amid the bushes led to the shrine, which was little more than a large brick and plaster alcove where the god sat above a tiny altar on which were the pathetic remains of a few marigolds and other odds and ends. A narrow seat curved below the altar and here the Maharajah and Lamia sat down after pushing aside several long strands of flowering jasmine which covered the rear of the shrine.

The lovers had been unusually silent, for the girl was enjoying the peace and beauty of the scene and her companion busy with his own thoughts. Watching the sunset fade beyond the uneven hill-tops, Lamia turned suddenly and smiled.

"The sunset brings to my mind, Beloved, the strange beliefs they hold in the Far North."

"What beliefs, O Favoured of Krishna?" asked the Maharajah lightly.

"I have heard them say the sun, growing cool at the day's end, sinks down into Hell and rises in the dawn white again with the heat from the fires."

"A fanciful thought, fit only for children."

"Perhaps, but what lies in your mind concerning life, and death, and suchlike, Beloved?" asked the girl slowly and thoughtfully. "Never have we spoken of these things. Sometimes my mind is blown this way and that by uneasy doubts. There are indeed many faiths in this land."

"Ah hi, this is a subject for greybeards and wise men, not such as we. Rather would I fondle your tiny hands and meditate upon their strange beauty."

Lamia made a small grimace.

"Always when I would talk on such things you turn them aside as of no consequence. Tell me briefly what lies in your mind," she insisted gently. "We Hindus have so many gods, but they who

follow Mahommed have only one like the pale men in the South who come from across the great waters."

The Maharajah sighed and smiled indulgently.

"I am as the Emperor Akbar, believing all faiths lead to one end, although they may follow curious paths."

"To one god?"

"Yes."

"But what of him?" Lamia indicated the god behind them. "Also there is Kali Mata, and Lahishma Devi, and all the others to whom we must pay due regard. It is because of this my mind becomes confused.

"They are but servants serving the One."

"Wah, you believe thus?" cried the girl, startled and a little frightened.

Her companion was about to reply, but instead turned his head sharply and stared towards the spot where the path, skirting the shrine, vanished behind a clump of shrubs a few feet away. The girl, seeing his action, also turned her head in that direction. There came a soft shuffling sound followed by the appearance of a white-bearded old man, who leaned on a stout stick and carried a large, round-bellied basket under one arm. His cotton clothes were sad and dun coloured, but he wore a flaming orange pugri rolled heavily and carelessly over his grey hairs.

The stranger, whose head had been bent, suddenly raised it and stared with a pair of small, black, very much alive, eyes. The brown, wrinkled face then slowly changed and the sunken lips opened, showing one long, lone tooth standing out like a blasted tree on a hillside. He glared as if unable to believe what he saw.

"Greetings, old man! What do you do in the place?" enquired the Maharajah kindly.

The ancient did not reply, but stood quivering with fright and then, hurriedly putting down his basket, he dropped to his knees and bowed his head on to the path. He remained in this position for a few moments patting the grass on either side of his head with open palms. He then raised himself and squatted with both claw-like hands resting on his bent thighs.

"Mighty Prince, I crave a hundred pardons. It was in my mind that few men came to this spot," he said quaveringly.

"It is nothing. What were you going to do and why do you bring your children to this remote place?" The Maharajah indicated the basket.

"The Thrice Born is indeed observant and wiser than many Brahmins. I come to this spot that I may make offering to him, Ganesh, so that my children shall continue to thrive."

"He is a charmer of snakes," cried Lamia shuddering. "It is an ill omen."

Her lover shook his head as he asked the man to show him the snakes. The basket was drawn up at once, the lid unfastened and

lifted off to display two cobras curled up and asleep. One was much larger than the other, and the Maharajah praised their size and beauty.

"Yes, Huzoor, they are husband and wife. It is eight moons since first I became possessed of them, but already they love me, their father."

The man leaned forward, made a curious sound and the great male stirred.

"Enough, old man," said the Maharajah sitting back. "Tell me how you came by your children. I have wondered how this thing was done."

"Huzoor, I go out into the jungle to certain spots known only to us who are snake charmers and there I sit before the hole and sing songs on my pipe. If the gods are kind they then come up out of the ground and I catch them with these." The man held up his hands. "Great swiftness is necessary because my children are quick tempered before they come to know and love me."

"Have they ever bitten you?"

"Yes, Gracious Prince, and the bite concerns these very ones. The tale is not without merit, but they drove me from my country in the South saying that I had slain my enemy, Durga Dass. It was without truth, but there were no witnesses and I am old and would spend my days in peace."

"Tell us the tale and we will judge its merit."

"As the Heaven Born wishes." The old man closed the basket and pushed it aside before beginning his story. "I am named Dowda and lived in the South in the shadow of the hills where I practised my art. Nine moons ago, at the beginning of the hot weather, a sickness fell upon my snakes so that they died, leaving me without means to earn my food. When beating my head with grief on the floor in my house I then remembered a great snake hole in the jungle to the West and my heart became light again.

"With the empty basket and the pipe I went out on a night of the full moon and came to the hole that was known to me. I played very sweetly on my pipe and then, putting my ear to the hole, I heard rustling deep down in the earth and knew they were there." The man stopped and chuckled, and his listeners knew that something unpleasant was coming. "Taking up my pipe to charm them to me I heard a sound behind me as I sat before the hole. Turning my head I saw Durga Dass approaching. He was also a charmer of snakes and my enemy. He cried aloud at once saying the hole was his and that I was a thief. He made me eat dirt and abuse, and there followed much loud-voiced argument. Bending down he pulled my beard so that we rolled on the ground raging together. It was then the two cobras came up out of the hole and bit us. One took me by the toe, and the other fastened its jaws on Durga Dass' forearm. Crying aloud in great fear we fell apart. I took my knife and at once cut off my toe, but my enemy could not cut

off his arm and that cobra was a great male who would not release his grip. Durga Dass was more aged than I and he danced in the moonlight crying to me for aid. I laughed and told him to aid himself. And so my enemy, the evil one, the liar, and the would-be thief, died there in the jungle before my eyes. He died slowly and with much pain.

"When the great snake opened his jaws I took that slayer, and also his wife, who had bitten me. Doubtless it was the will of the gods."

"What befell afterwards, old man?"

"I came to this country in aimless wandering. I am old, wifeless, and without sons. They drove me out. Who cares if I die here or there? When you come to the end of your span of years what mattered in youth shrinks to that of no account. I am content." The man paused and glanced at Lamia for a moment as he scratched himself, and it was obvious that he was hesitating.

"Yes, speak what lies in your mind," urged the Maharajah smiling.

"The Prince of Princes has been gracious beyond measure and I would repay. I die on the twelfth day of the tenth moon in the night before the dawn. Little time remains and we, my children and I, will go to the burning ghat together. Because the gods are sometimes kind to such as I they give us a little foreknowledge. I may speak with an open mind?"

"Yes. What of the future is known to you?"

The ancient grew slightly rigid, raised his right arm above his head and for a few moments the scene became tense. Lamia felt for and held her lover's hand as they waited.

"Huzoor, I will say what lies in my mind. Before the moon wanes there will come to you a prince from the South. Beware of him, my lord. Because of this man, she who sits beside you will tread a dangerous path." He turned his glittering eyes on Lamia, who shrank back. "To you, O Queen, I say, when the time comes remember me and this spot. Go forward bravely to that which awaits you on the far side." Scrambling hastily to his feet the old man picked up his basket. "We shall meet again, Huzoor. If the gods have ears and will listen, the price of folly shall be lessened and all will end well." Turning, he trotted away and vanished on the path by which he had come.

For some time neither the girl nor her companion moved. Lamia then leaned against him like a scared child.

"I am afraid. What meant his words of ill-omen?" she asked in a low voice.

"It is not in my mind, but it is strange he should speak of a prince from the South," replied the Maharajah getting to his feet.

"That is indeed a matter for consideration and bears the ring of truth."

"What meaning lay behind?"

"When we came to this spot I was much vexed by news which was brought to-day. My wife's brother, who rules in the South, has been summoned by the Emperor and comes to stay in our palace to rest and refresh himself before continuing to Agra. I would rather see him in Hell because we do not love each other, but to deny him would make much trouble. He is a dull man, without laughter, and eaten up with false pride and moves like the buffalo."

"How long does he remain?" enquired Lamia, as they moved down the path towards where the boat waited to take them back to the bund.

"One night; perhaps two. I must entertain him as if he were Akbar himself. This thing is as troublesome as a boil upon the neck."

Nothing further was said until they were some distance from the shore. Suddenly Lamia's sad mood, brought on by the snake charmer's words, faded as a thought occurred to her.

"Beloved, I will aid you in this matter. I will dance before this prince and charm him into smiles," she suggested.

"The thought is a diverting one," replied the Maharajah, grinning boyishly. "I would then watch his face and see desire light up in his fishlike eyes. He will doubtless crave you and it will be my delight to deny him. A pretty thought indeed."

"There will be a great durbar and I shall wear all my jewels?" cried the girl much excited.

"Perhaps. I will consider this matter, but do not forget the old man said that because of this unwelcome guest there would be danger for you. It would be better if you remained in the zenana."

"I do not read it so. If there be danger from this man, and you do not deny him, it remains whether I stay in the zenana or sit beside you in the durbar hall."

"Ho ho, that is reasoning worthy of wise men," exclaimed the Maharajah highly pleased. "You speak the truth. We will not attempt to pluck awry the strings of fate but face them boldly. You shall dance, and if this aged man is not a babbler I will be at hand to see that naught occurs."

When Lamia next saw her mother she told her of the snake charmer and his warning. Ameyra listened intently, and for a moment her face wore an anxious frown, but it soon cleared.

"I know of this prince, the Rao Chandra. He is a vice-ridden jackal from whom we have naught to fear, my daughter. Were it not so I would say you should feign sickness until his departure. They say in the bazaars that the Emperor Akbar has summoned him to speak harshly and to order him to put his house in order. There have been many murders and black deeds in Ajanta of recent days. Because of these things he will doubtless be deflated and easy to handle as a kid. He is also a weak, unsubtle man."

Ameyra expanded on this theme and ended by telling Lamia that if she were modest and retiring nothing could happen. The girl was partly reassured, but at night her dreams were troubled ones.

Several days before the expected arrival of Rao Chandra, ruler of the large state of Ajanta, the palace was the scene of great activity and preparations for his reception were hurried forward. On the appointed day a suitable escort was despatched to the frontier to welcome and bring him to the capital. It was, however, late in the evening before the concourse entered the main gate of Rajigarh. Rao Chandra, riding a war-horse, was surrounded by his personal staff, and as the long procession wound through the narrow streets it was followed by a rabble-like baggage train.

The two rulers met and embraced before the assembled courtiers in the open durbar hall which faced the main courtyard. The host then delivered his flowery speech of welcome and to everyone's surprise, including the Maharajah, Rao Chandra replied in the new Urdu language, with the result that he was only partly understood by many present.

"You have indeed mastered the new tongue, my brother," observed the Maharajah smiling and also using Urdu. "The Emperor will no doubt be enchanted. As you hear, I also am not unacquainted with it."

The air of self-satisfaction on the guest's face faded, a fact that did not pass unnoticed as they turned and went into the Maharajah's private apartments.

The next morning the main courtyard had been turned into an arena where sporting events were to take place as a part of the royal visitor's entertainment. By the time the two princes had taken their seats well forward in the durbar hall, every balcony, balustrade, and stairway overlooking the yard was packed with an eager, excited crowd. At the far end, near the gate, a large area had been set aside for the general public from the city and it was so full as to appear a solid mass of heads and shoulders.

Directly above the durbar hall Lamia was seated before the long, pierced marble screen and beside her was Papeeta. There were also present most of the women of the zenana who giggled, chattered, and commented upon the animated scene below. This was the first time Lamia had appeared publicly as one of the zenana and with a recognized position. She was amused and much flattered by the other women's deferential manner towards her; in fact they treated her as if she were already royalty. In return, she was gay and friendly towards everyone, with the result within a short time all restraint had vanished and the party became united and friendly. They offered each other sweetmeats and fruit and chattered unceasingly. No one as yet had seen the guest and in consequence speculation was free and somewhat wild.

"They say he is fat and without humour," exclaimed a dainty little creature with a yellow sari across her hair, who was the youngest daughter of the finance minister.

"Yes, and it is also whispered that he is coarse and has eyes like fish," announced another girl.

Everyone now turned and looked at Lamia to see what effect these comments had upon her. It was, however, Papeeta who replied, she being slightly shocked by Lamia's free and easy manner, and also scandalized by these outspoken remarks.

"Cease your senseless gabbling," she ordered primly. "The Lady Lamia does not wish to hear unseemly words passed upon our lord's wife's brother. If our lord heard of this he would have you severely slapped."

This immediately damped the conversation, but at that moment the first event in the programme started and everyone became concentrated upon the arena. Two mighty men with oiled bodies, bulging muscles, and huge chests, leapt into the open space and began to wrestle on a large piece of matting. The assembly grew quiet as it watched the evenly matched pair, clad only in the scantiest of coloured loin cloths, heave and strain and grunt with their exertions. To and fro they swayed, falling with heavy thuds, and scrambling to their feet, parting and re-clinching.

"Ah, I favour the blue-clothed one," cried the girl in the yellow sari. "He is strong-loined and handsome. I wish that he is the winner."

"Shameless," reproved an elderly matron nearby. "You would favour an elephant. Cease and watch."

The match continued for so long that the crowd grew restless, but it was finally decided in favour of the man in the red loin cloth. No sooner had the wrestlers gone than several men mounted on superb horses and armed with swords galloped into the arena and staged a mock, but realistic fight. Blood actually flowed and several were shamefully unhorsed to the great delight of the crowd. This event was followed by hairy, bearded Sikhs who wielded clubs in a manner so bewildering that the spectators gasped. There were then sword duels on foot, tumblers, and acrobats.

The final and most spectacular event was an elephant fight. To the left of the arena a low, thick wall had been built and on either side of this two great beasts, with their mahouts behind their ears, faced each other and the fight began. The elephants in some manner had been made hostile towards each other and it was not long before it became obvious that the contest was very much in earnest. The massive foreheads crashed together over the wall, and curling, snake-like trunks were interlocked as the beasts heaved and struggled for mastery with their mahouts urging them on by shrill yells of encouragement. Now and again, during a breakaway, one elephant would trumpet furiously to be answered by angry, high-pitched squeals from his opponent.

The contest continued on the usual lines until, without warning, there came a dramatic variation. The beast on the side of the wall nearest to the durbar hall, although somewhat smaller than his adversary was more belligerently minded; in fact he desired ardently to get to really close quarters. Leaning forward with both knees pressed against the wall he pushed, with the result the wall dissolved into a mass of rubble and dust. The elephant promptly stepped over the ruin and drove the remains of his sawn-off tusks deep into the flanks of his surprised rival, who grunted loudly and staggered back for several paces. The aggressor then raised his trunk and plucking off the opposing mahout he cast him well aside, where he sprawled in the dust. This action further disconcerted the second animal who, however, promptly warded off any further attacks upon his flanks.

The remaining mahout had become frenzied with rage and fear, and beat his elephant's head with the end of his goad in a most ferocious manner with no effect whatsoever. By this time the spectators had grown wild with excitement and every man with a voice to raise, raised it and yelled advice or encouragement; such a scene as this had never before been witnessed.

Suddenly the larger elephant decided he had had enough of this unusual encounter and so began a cautious retreat towards the public enclosure. Seeing the mass of slate-grey bone and muscle bearing down upon it the crowd surged uncertainly first to the right and then to the left, where it broke up and scattered wildly in all directions to escape from the pounding feet. Surrounded by howling men, the retreating beast now lost his head and began hurrying round the courtyard seeking a means of escape. The victor, further excited by the noise and confusion, set off in pursuit, with the result that a maddened stampede took place in the crowd. Fleeing men were trodden on and their screams added to the din; the durbar hall was invaded by all and sundry; and the royal visitor was seen to turn pale with fright. A thick pillar supporting one of the arches of the hall crumbled as a huge flank cannoned off it, and the whole area trembled with the pounding of massive feet.

The Maharajah, who had got to his feet, stood wondering what should be done, because a loose and excited elephant was not easy to recapture. The hunted beast, however, solved the problem by catching sight of the gateway. Swerving violently, he fled through it and was gone. The hunter, being some distance behind, missed this dramatic exit and halted abruptly as he stared about trying to locate his rival. He then also saw the gate and made for it at high speed. The subsequent recapture of the beasts was simple, because the first went back to his stable where he was followed by the second, who, on the way, had been calmed down by his mahout. There was, however, a good deal of trumpeting and disturbance in the stables among the other beasts before peace was restored.

The assembly in the courtyard now began to disperse, but in

the durbar hall the courtiers and officials stood waiting for their prince to retire, and many watched him, expecting an outburst of rage and orders for punishment. He, however, turned to his brother-in-law, who had got to his feet and was standing beside him.

"An unseemly ending to our poor entertainment," he said calmly. "In future they shall be always chained by the legs so that this shall not be repeated. Come, we will now retire and refresh ourselves, and after rest and contemplation will enjoy less exciting pastimes after the heat of the day has passed."

Rao Chandra stared in bewilderment at his host as they walked down the hall.

"You are not enraged and do not give orders for the punishment of those responsible?" he exclaimed.

"There is no need, my brother," replied the Maharajah smiling. "It was the will of the gods. I know the elephant and the fault did not lie with the mahout. Anger clouds the mind and causes discord in the spirit. What is done cannot be undone. To give punishment would add to the misfortune."

Rao Chandra shrugged his plump shoulders and turned away his head, gestures which implied he thought his companion was light-headed.

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During the heat of the late afternoon, when Lamia was resting alone in the inner room, the curtain before the door was carefully drawn aside and her lover came into the room unannounced. So softly did he approach that she did not hear him and lay among the cushions with closed eyes, dozing lightly as he stood looking down at her with a small, twisted smile on his lips. She then became aware of his presence and, turning her head, opened her eyes and stared up at him for a long moment.

"Do not move," he said quickly. "I will sit beside you."

He sat down on the edge of the cushions with his back half turned towards the girl. Picking up one of her hands he fondled it for a moment in silence.

"What has befallen? Your mind is disturbed, Beloved," said Lamia softly. "Never before have you come to visit me at this hour."

"It is true. I am restless as a dog with mange, having learned that my brother-in-law remains with us for four nights. This is indeed an affliction, he being an ill-omened fellow bringing misfortune at his heels. I wish he had fallen from his horse on the journey and was now in Hell."

The girl smiled at her companion's doleful voice as she squeezed his hand.

"The time will pass quickly, My Heart's Delight. Why is he such an affliction? I have not seen him, but they say he is merely a dull man."

"Even the elephants objected to his presence. You witnessed what occurred this morning. Never before has such a thing been seen and doubtless it was because of his evil eye. Already he complains of this and that, and my palace has become unblest. I am defenceless. If my mother and my wife were here then I would give him to them and be at peace."

Lamia promptly sat upright and laughed.

"Such despondency, such dolefulness fills me with alarm," she announced. "Let me lift the cloud so that you shall smile again."

The Maharajah shook his head and frowned as he got to his feet and crossing the room went out on to the balcony, where he looked across the city sweltering in the heat of the afternoon. Lamia, now vaguely disturbed, followed him.

"What ails you? Have you some sickness, Beloved?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, a sickness of the spirit," he answered gloomily. "A dark foreboding hangs like a storm cloud over me, clutching at my heart."

"Because of him?"

"I do not know. Before coming to you I fell into a light sleep and my dreams were unpleasant. In them I saw the aged man who came to us beside the shrine. Shouting, he gibbered at me like a wayside monkey and I strove to understand his words, but they were without sense." The Maharajah rubbed the back of his neck and continued as if speaking his thoughts aloud. "Rao Chandra is weak and puffed up, and such men are dangerous. If because of him misfortune overtook you, O Supreme Rapture, I would tear him asunder with my own hands. I have considered and would have you return to your mother until he has gone. Thus may we avert the danger and lessen my anxiety."

"Never will I return to her in such a manner," announced the girl firmly and with much dignity. "If there is to be calamity, then I will be here at your side to share it. It is in my mind, Beloved, that your fears are without reason and your mind is heated as if by the fumes of wine." She paused as an idea occurred to her and she stared intently at her companion's face. "Because of this sadness of the spirit you will not drink too much wine to-night? Promise me this thing."

Her lover nodded and the girl tried desperately to think of something bright and diverting to say. She wanted very much to discuss the deplorable incident of the elephant fight, but wisely decided that this was not an opportune moment to do so.

"To-night I shall wear my finest dress and all my jewels," she cried. "I have practised my dances so that I shall charm all to smiles and good humour. I am much excited. It will be a great *darbar* and here in the *zenana* they are consumed with envy that I shall sit beside you."

The Maharajah turned his head sharply and stared at the girl with mock severity.

"I said you should depart to your mother's house, and it must be so."

Lamia listened and was aghast, and then brought her feminine wiles into action. Her face began to pucker up and tears welled up in her eyes.

"Ah hi! Bapri Bap! I shall miss all. You would deprive me of a great pleasure," she wailed. "You no longer love me. I will cast myself from this balcony."

This, as she had intended it should do, had an instant and desirable result.

"It shall be as you wish, Charmer of Souls," replied her lover quickly. He then sighed and placed an arm about her waist. "But you shall obey me and wear the half veil."

Delighted at having got her own way so easily Lamia ignored the question of the veil and clapped her hands with glee. She then began to ask innumerable questions about the coming durbar. While answering them the Maharajah lost much of his depression and even smiled several times.

CHAPTER IX

A FEW hours before the durbar was due to take place the Maharajah had decided that it should be held on the bund beside the lake and not in the palace. This at once produced an orgy of re-organization and harassed officials drove hordes of perspiring servants to great feats of energy. The change of plan was heartily welcomed by the many guests who had assembled from all parts of the state, because now there would be some possibility of cooling breezes, whereas in the stuffy palace they would have suffered acute discomfort in their heavy ceremonial clothes.

As the clear, dark night closed down, the promenade and the hall on the bund became a sight of great beauty. On the balustrade, the tiny pier pavilions, the roof of the hall, and in many other places, thousands of tiny, clear-burning oil lamps were being lit by servants, and soon the whole area looked as if a multitude of stars had fluttered down to rest like tired birds. The long doors of the hall were flung back and spread on the green and white marble floor were great carpets and scores of plump silken cushions placed in readiness. Suits of armour lined the side walls, and on the space above them were weapons, shields, and strange helmets. A dozen hanging lamps glowed, and small tables were placed in convenient spots as the final preparations were made.

Towards the rear of the hall, facing the central doors, was a wide, low dais on which stood a great legless sofa covered with a cloth of raised gold, and it rested on a vast Persian carpet whose

colours glowed like those of jewels. Behind the dais, on both sides, were small spaces reserved for bands of musicians and the prince's personal attendants.

In due course, guests came down out of the palace, through the gardens, and wended their way up the paths on to the bund. In pairs and small groups they strolled on the promenade, or leaned against the balustrade, gazing down into the still waters or across at the hillsides. Soldiers, courtiers, noblemen, wealthy landowners, and a horde of the Maharajah's more distant relatives, laughed and jested, or listened to the latest gossip and even scandal. There were flashes of gold and silver brocade from the long, full-skirted coats; gleamings and glitterings from innumerable jewels; while swords and daggers of all shapes hung from belts, while the splendid pugris and turbans rivalled the sunset in their varied colours.

Bevies of fully veiled women from the zenana came rustling in their gorgeous silks, chirruping like flocks of birds as they hastened to take up their positions behind the pierced screens beyond the dais in the hall. The scent of exotic perfumes clung to the still air long after they had passed, and gallants twirled their moustaches, or patted brushed-up beards and smiled as they realized the source.

At the far end of the hall, beyond a side entrance, was collected a strange assortment of people who talked in low tones. Made up of servants, valets, entertainers, musicians, and minor officials, they crowded together and peered out on to the promenade, commenting frankly on those who passed within sight. The morals, appearance, and general deportment, all received attention which would have enraged the 'Commented-upon' had they heard them, and specially lewd and unkind were the remarks reserved for Rao Chandra's suite.

As if at some given signal the crowd of guests suddenly turned towards the hall to take their seats. There was more than a little hustling in the doorways and several black looks passed between jostlers and the jostled. In this state there was no rigid order of precedence, but it was generally accepted that on such occasions as these minor royalty, the well born, and high state officials sat nearest to the dais. Now and again, however, some bumptious younger man, who wished to catch the eye of his ruler, would push himself forward at public functions. This now took place and led to more than grumbling and vague protests from those nearby and developed into a regrettable scene.

Bag Ram was a vain, harmless, good-looking young man dressed too respendently for his position. As the senior treasurer's nephew he had little social standing, but being employed as a minor official in the palace he had some claim to be present at the durbar. Unnoticed he joined the coughing, shuffling crowd who poured into the hall and gradually settled down. The accommodation, however, was limited, and many guests were forced to remain outside, where they clustered about the two side doors. Between the two lines of squatting guests was the usual carpeted, wide space which stretched

from the foot of the dais to the central door, and it was here that the performers would give their entertainment.

Several feet from the dais on the right-hand side, Bag Ram had selected a cushion in the third row, but so absorbed had he been in deciding where he would sit that he failed to notice who his immediate companion was to be; had he done so he would have retired hurriedly. This was Jerripan, a thin, hawk-faced, fierce old man, who was a personage and had been the Maharajah's tutor, and in consequence he knew everyone of any importance in the state. Suddenly he turned his head and saw who was at his left side. Jerripan glared at his companion with outraged amazement.

"What are you doing in this place?" he snarled. "Begone, Scum!"

"Huzoor, I would depart but cannot," replied Bag Ram quickly and with intense embarrassment, as he indicated the packed ranks about him.

"Am I to be forced to sit beside the dregs of the palace?" hissed the old man, his dark eyes sparkling with growing anger. "Begone and join the servants."

Bag Ram glanced about nervously and hesitated. To try and leave his place would now cause a most unpleasant scene and call undue attention to himself. Without more ado, Jerripan scrambled to his feet, shot out a hand and strove to drag the young man to his feet.

"Son of Calamity! Rogue! Rascal!" he shouted. "I will have you severely punished for this insult to me."

In desperation the young man managed to get to his feet and those nearby watched the little scene with interest, some amused and others annoyed. Jerripan, in an effort to hasten Bag Ram's departure, trod on a man's fingers, producing a howl of surprised anguish and a flood of abuse. Realizing what had happened he moved hurriedly aside and cannoned into Bag Ram, who was sent sprawling across the head and shoulders of a soldier. In a flash all was confusion in the area. Men roared with laughter, cursed, or yelled advice. Two court chamberlains now dashed on to the scene and their scandalized voices added to the din.

Jerripan, overcome by rage, bent down and snatching off Bag Ram's tightly rolled and gorgeous pugri he cast it away so that it fell in the open space, where it rolled before settling down against the foot of the dais. This action was one of the most deadly of all insults and those watching gasped and wondered what would happen. At that instant a hush settled on the hall. Through the centre door came the Maharajah leading his brother-in-law by the right hand. Slowly they passed down towards the dais and the storm centre became shocked into immobility; no one knew what to do, so no one did anything other than stare at the approaching princes.

The Maharajah, in spite of his promise to Lamia, had drunk deeply during the meal which had preceded the durbar and was

now in a pleasant state of befuddlement. He failed to notice either the group on his right, or the fallen pugri, but passed on up the three steps of the dais. Rao Chandra, however, saw that something unusual was taking place, although he did not comment on it. He also had drunk a large amount of wine, but had remained comparatively clear-headed.

The two princes sat down on the sofa, but during the brief period that their backs had been turned, both Jerripan and Bag Ram sat down, and the chamberlains faded away. Only the gaudy pugri remained to show what had taken place.

The Maharajah was a figure of dignified splendour. His tight-fitting, single coat of silver brocade reached to well below his knees, and about his waist was a supple gold belt from which hung a short ceremonial sword. His only jewellery was several strings of huge pearls and a broad band of gold filigree set with flat emeralds worn aslant across a tight, blue pugri. Rao Chandra was festooned with necklaces, rings, brooches and daggers, while a great aigrette of diamonds sparkled in his pugri. There were many furtive and contemptuous smiles among the warrior guests as they saw this display.

"He is like a fat turtle," whispered one grizzled old soldier.

"Yes, and decked with jewels like a woman," agreed his companion. "They say he is without wit or wisdom."

Both princes, one at each end of the sofa, sat back. The Maharajah at once leaned across and poured himself out a goblet of wine from a nearby table while his guest, fat and thick-lipped, gazed haughtily about the room with slightly protruding eyes as he fingered one of his necklaces. It was obvious to everyone that here was a clear expression of the dull-witted fully prepared to be bored.

From behind the screen, at the rear of the dais, Lamia now appeared preceded by Papeeta, who hastily put down a large cushion on the dais beside the Maharajah's legs, before retiring. Gliding forward, Lamia seated herself on the cushion and adjusted the folds of her dress. It had been agreed, but not without much reluctance on her part, that she should not dance on this occasion, and in consequence her clothes were those of a queen rather than of a zenana favourite. She wore a full skirt and a tight, long-sleeved bodice of pale purple silk heavily embroidered with gold thread. Over the bodice was a corsage almost covered with seed pearls, and round her neck was the necklace given to her from the treasure in the Fort. On her head was a stiff, rimless cap from whose crown creamed a length of white silk which flowed down the nape of her neck over her left shoulder and so across her face to make a half veil. The cap was studded with gems whose brightness matched her sparkling, excited eyes.

A small band of musicians opened the proceedings by playing selections of music which wailed, screeched, and crashed, in the eastern manner, without any resemblance to a tune. The

Maharajah, having put down his wine goblet, stretched out a hand and patted Lamia on the shoulder, and she turned and looked up at him. She then stared across at Rao Chandra, who was regarding her with particular interest. She noticed his dark, southern skin and dull eyes, and knew that the rumours concerning him were correct. It flashed across her mind how strange it was that he could be the brother of the Maharanee, a charming person utterly different from this coarse man.

Personages were now summoned to the dais and presented to the visitor, who behaved with amiable courtesy to each as he paused for a few moments before returning to his place.

As soon as the presentations were finished, entertainers came on to the scene to the accompaniment of fresh bursts of energy from the musicians. There were tumblers, jugglers, court jesters in keen encounters of wits which caused roars of laughter, and many others too numerous to mention. It was during a song recital by four young women seated in a row that Lamia glanced down and saw the pugri lying against the dais just below her feet. Bending down she picked it up, glanced at its elegance, and then looked to see from where it might have come. The Maharajah saw the action and took the pugri from the girl. He stared at it and then waved the singers away with an impatient hand as he turned to a chamberlain standing directly behind the sofa.

"What is this?" he demanded.

"My lord, it is not in my mind," replied the man bewildered.

Frowning, the Maharajah turned to his guests and held out the pugri.

"From whose head did this come?" he demanded, glancing over the packed ranks.

There was a pause and he was forced to repeat his question, but in a tone of voice that made several men start convulsively. Bag Ram, a figure of trembling, abject misery, was now forced to his feet by those near to him. Instantly every head was turned in his direction.

"Ah hi, there is the rogue! Come here, young man," ordered the Maharajah sternly.

Sick and faint with apprehension, Bag Ram pushed his way out on to the carpet and staggered towards the dais.

"How came your pugri to be lying at my feet?"

The young man was too terrified to speak. He stood and trembled and trembled. It was then that Jerripan came to the rescue. Getting to his feet he spoke clearly.

"It was I, my lord. I cast it there."

"Oh ho, it is you Jerripan, you old tiger!" cried the Maharajah, his face relaxing. "What means this insult?"

The old man now explained the situation, while those nearby smiled and wondered what would happen.

"So you would push forward and sit among your betters,

Rascal," snapped the Maharajah throwing the pugri down at Bag Ram's feet. "My tutor's action was well deserved. You must be taught finer manners, Upstart. We will consider the punishment."

Lamia saw Bag Ram's good looks and misery, and was intensely sorry for him. She turned to her lover impulsively and placed a hand on his knee.

"My lord, he is but a thoughtless boy," she said quickly. "The offence is not grave. I would have you spare him."

He glanced down at her and then smiled.

"It is true, but he must be taught his manners. What form shall the lesson take?"

The girl hesitated and then gave a tiny laugh.

"He shall sit here on the lowest step and face the hall holding his pugri in his hands, my lord. Thus shall his pride and vanity be lowered."

This pronouncement caused laughter and nodding of heads, and even Rao Chandra smiled.

"An excellent thought. It shall be so. Seat yourself, Puppy," ordered the Maharajah, pointing to a spot in the middle of the lowest step of the dais. "This lesson will not easily be forgotten."

Thankfully, Bag Ram did as he was told, and the durbar proceeded on its normal course. Rao Chandra, who had been a much interested spectator in the scene, now leaned across towards his host, who was drinking deeply from his goblet.

"Who is this that sits at your feet?" he asked. "She has wit and charm."

The Maharajah looked at his brother-in-law over the rim of the goblet.

"She is the Rose of Hindustan. My brightest jewel," he answered briefly.

Rao Chandra nodded and looked down at Lamia who was watching a pair of expert jugglers.

"I hear that no longer are there dancing girls in your zenana, my brother. Is my sister, or this girl, the cause of this strangeness?"

The Maharajah laughed drunkenly and patted his guest's arm.

"When the sun appears the stars vanish," he said, his mood suddenly becoming aggressive. "This girl is lovely beyond imagining. You would see her face?"

Rao Chandra nodded eagerly and his host promptly turned to Lamia and told her to unfasten her veil. She started and looked up.

"Unveil, my lord! Here? Now?"

"Yes, do as I bid you."

The girl hesitated and then slowly unfastened the white silk which slid away from her face. Watching his guest, the Maharajah saw first astonishment and then burning desire light up in the dull eyes. Even the thick lips trembled and moved in and out.

"Is she not a stream of bewitchment, a supreme rapture?"

"She is very fair," replied Rao Chandra thickly. "Indeed a jewel of peerless ecstasy."

"Yes, and like all jewels may only be worn by her owner."

During this scene the jugglers had been replaced by a tumbling clown, but few men looked at him, all being much too interested in what was taking place on the dais. Lamia had not moved since removing her veil and sat with a lowered head and fingers which were entwining. She had heard all that had been said between the two princes and realized her lover was intoxicated. Her heart grew cold and she knew that something unpleasant was about to happen. Should she retire before it was too late? Before she could make up her mind the Maharajah spoke again.

"Not only is this pearl a fount of wisdom but she can dance so that the senses swoon with delight," he announced boastfully. "Dances of strange form, and also on the tight-rope like a butterfly in the sun. There is no one so skilled on the rope in all Hindustan. By my head I swear it. Is it not so, Heart's Delight?"

The girl nodded but did not raise her head.

"She may dance on the rope, but this is a small thing," replied Rao Chandra, quick to seize an opportunity to praise his own state. "In the South, in my state, there is one who can walk great distances on a rope stretched high above the ground. He is the greatest in this art."

"That is senseless talk. I say this girl is the most skilled," replied the Maharajah angrily.

"To dance on a little rope close to the ground is one thing, but to walk great distances on a high one is another," announced the guest loudly and aggressively. "I say he in my state is beyond all."

In a sudden, drunken rage the Maharajah leapt to his feet and glared down at his brother-in-law. A tension sprang up and a pregnant hush closed down over the assembly. Men held their breath and clutched each other's arms.

"By all the gods you lie," snarled the Maharajah.

Rao Chandra remained seated and apparently undisturbed as he looked through the central door to where he could see the lights twinkling on the black water of the lake.

"This is a wager? You will prove it?" he suggested, returning his gaze to his host's distorted face.

"Yes, by my head!"

"Good! This girl shall walk on a rope across the water of your lake as does he who lives in my state," replied Rao Chandra smiling.

"You shall be a queen, Beloved, if you show this boaster he lies," cried the Maharajah to Lamia, who had risen to her feet. "You shall cross the lake from side to side and prove your skill."

The girl stared at her lover with wide, frightened eyes, but said nothing.

"What if she fails?" enquired the guest softly. "It being a wager I claim that she shall lie with me."

"It shall be so," shouted his host, beside himself with fury. "You are but a child crying for the moon."

Lamia had put out a hand in a feeble attempt to restrain her lover, but her knees suddenly gave way and she sank down on to her cushion. She then fainted and, slipping sideways, fell over on to Bag Ram, who turned and caught her in his arms.

Standing motionless for a minute in a dead silence the Maharajah realized what he had done and the effect of drink died out in him. Raising his chin and stepping down off the dais he strode down the hall to the door and crossing the promenade leaned on the balustrade. A little to his left and near one of the flights of steps leading down to the water were several boatmen waiting to take any guests who might wish to go out on the lake. Without hesitation the Maharajah went to the steps, summoned a boat and getting into it ordered the man to row him out across the dark water.

During the ruler's dramatic departure from the hall no one moved. Rao Chandra watched him with an unpleasant smile on his lips, while Bag Ram held the unconscious Lamia tightly in his arms, and behind the dais several court officials held an agitated, low-toned conference. Rao Chandra then got to his feet and stepping down towards Bag Ram he attempted to take Lamia from him. The young man, however, moved away and shook his head. The prince, scowling heavily, came closer, whereupon Bag Ram turned his back.

"Give her to me," ordered the prince furiously.

"I will not," replied Bag Ram courageously. "She is our lord's, to whom I will return her."

This dangerous situation was relieved by the appearance of Papeeta and another woman from behind the screen, and snatching Lamia away they carried her off to the women's section. Rao Chandra watched them go, glared at Bag Ram, and then summoning his suite he departed from the hall. As soon as he had gone pandemonium broke out, every man roused to a high pitch of excitement. Grave and dignified soldiers and courtiers started fierce arguments, and voices were raised in anger, while fists were shaken and even beards tweaked.

Amid the noisy crowds there was one man who stood aside unruffled. It was the fierce old Diwan, who smiled to himself and then chuckled. This most unwise wager would certainly lead to the downfall of the favourite and her accursed mother, and as he pushed his way out of the hall he wondered how he could use the situation to benefit himself.

In spite of the lateness of the hour news of what had occurred was taken to Ameyra, who was raised from her bed to receive it. Setting out within a few minutes for the palace she found her daughter lying on the cushions in the inner room of her quarters surrounded

by Papeeta and several loudly weeping women. Lamia looked up at her mother as she hurried into the room, and sitting upright she tried to smile, but the effort was a failure.

"What dire disaster is this?" cried Ameyra slapping her breasts. "Why did you not prevent this wager, O Daughter of Foolishness? You sat close beside him."

"It was not possible, my mother," replied the girl plaintively. "He had drunk deeply and his brain was afire."

"Tell me all that befell," ordered Ameyra imperiously. "First send these away." She indicated Papeeta and the women.

When the room had been cleared the woman sat down beside her daughter, and Lamia, between fits of sobbing, told all that had occurred, even mentioning the scene with Bag Ram. Ameyra listened, interrupting now and again with searching questions.

"He announced before them all that he would make you a queen if you walked on this rope," she said as she got to her feet and began to pace up and down the room. "That is indeed strange and all is now made clear to me. He who read your horoscope said that you would walk on a narrow path. Would that I had known of this before. With training it could be done, but now it is impossible."

The more Ameyra considered the situation the less she liked it, and Lamia watched with distress her mother's growing agitation. What she needed now was not complaints and recriminations but the comfort of her lover's presence. He seemed to have deserted her in her time of need, and the same thought occurred to the elder woman.

"Where is he?" she demanded. "He should be at your side."

"I do not know. Papeeta says he left the hall alone while the foolish young man held me in his arms."

Ameyra snorted faintly and went out on to the balcony where a faint breeze swept over her heated face. Looking down at the black mass of the city she tried to steady her whirling thoughts and plan some course of action. She knew that the wager could not be put aside, having been made in open durbar; but surely there was some solution if only she could discover it. To expect her daughter to walk on a rope slung high above the lake was, of course, fantastic. How strange was the pattern of destiny. Just when she had convinced herself that nothing could mar the future, this storm had arisen to endanger all her plans. Sighing heavily she turned about and went back to Lamia, who was lying back among the cushions staring at the far wall. As Ameyra reached the edge of the cushions the heavy curtain before the door was pulled aside and the Maharajah came into the room. He stood for a moment taking in the scene, his eyes wild and his attire disordered. Without hesitation, Ameyra turned upon him.

"At last you come," she cried, being no respecter of persons when roused. "Because of your loose tongue you have placed my daughter in grave danger."

"My mother, my mother, he is the prince," wailed Lamia, as she got to her feet horrified by this high treason.

"I care not what he is," retorted the angry woman. "He is a babbler, a wine-bibber, and as foolish as the wayside ape."

Lamia moved across to her lover and putting an arm about her he stared at Ameyra with puzzled interest. No one had ever spoken to him in this manner and he was more interested than annoyed by it.

"Do not heed her, Beloved," implored the girl. "She is distraught and knows not what she says. I am sad and afraid. Tell me that we can avoid this thing which has numbed my heart."

"Yes, all will be well, My Pearl. It is an evil thing that I have done, but some way will be found."

"Evil has been done?" hissed Ameyra, her eyes glittering. "Our Lord of Rajilal jests. Before all he has pronounced himself a vain, boasting boy, well deserving of a beating. When rulers turn fools, it is we poor citizens who must suffer."

"Woman, you have lost your senses," exploded the Maharajah, thrusting Lamia from him. "I will hear no more. Leave these rooms."

"I will not! I at least have some sense left in my head. Have you considered that all Hindustan will say you wagered away your love in drunken boasting? Does your pride sink so low that it wriggles in the dust like a half-dead snake?"

Lamia listened to this outburst aghast and then collapsed on to the cushions, where she wept while her lover and her mother wrangled in a thoroughly undignified manner. Words flew to and fro like angry hornets and both soon became merely two enraged human beings. Ameyra, however, was the first to regain her self-control. Drawing herself up, she flung one end of her white sari across her shoulder and gave a final verdict.

"Now, at this moment I shall remove my daughter from this unblessed palace," she announced. "No longer shall she be exposed to lewd comments by all and sundry and from blackmen of the South. We will return to Ombra where men are men and not idle boasters."

Had Ameyra said such things to any other prince she would have been quietly strangled, and knowing this even she felt some qualms of apprehension, but instead of further infuriating the Maharajah it actually calmed him. He knew she could easily be prevented from carrying out her threat, but any further complications would add to the already tangled situation. Forcibly to restrain or to punish her for her words would soon become known. It would be better to appease and make use of her.

"It is now you who speak loosely and unwisely," he said in normal tones. "The matter should be discussed between us without heat. What is done is done and cannot be gainsaid."

Ameyra instantly responded to the change, also an idea has just occurred to her.

"My lord, when must this trial take place?" she asked. "Your guest, the prince, goes to Agra. If the test may be postponed until his return time will be gained for practice and all may yet be well."

The Maharajah shook his head gloomily.

"I also have considered this, but it cannot be. From Agra he goes to Hardwar and does not return here. It must take place to-morrow."

Both Ameyra and Lamia gave cries of distress at this news and for several minutes no one spoke, all being occupied with their thoughts. Suddenly a brilliant thought flashed across Lamia's mind and she scrambled to her feet in great excitement. Catching her lover's arm she clung to it.

"A thought has come into my mind," she cried. "A brave and excellent thought."

"What is it?" enquired Ameyra and the Maharajah in unison.

"Nothing was said, my lord, where on the lake I should walk upon the rope?"

"No, only that you should span it from side to side."

"Then all is well." Lamia clapped her hands and danced to and fro. "Do you not see how clever I am? That man of ill-omen, the snake-charmer said to us that when the time came I was to remember him and that spot. This I have done. The water of the lake becomes narrow at this place, and for me to cross it there would still be from side to side."

The Maharajah, gaped in amazement for a moment and then gave a shout of intense relief; while Ameyra frowned, not realizing the full significance of Lamia's remarks.

"By Suraji! by Ganesh! and by all the gods! this is the answer," he exclaimed excitedly. "You are wiser than many Brahmins. The distance is small and yet the wager will stand. It is a thought from the gods."

Seeing her mother's puzzled face, Lamia quickly explained the situation. The elder woman listened and was visibly impressed.

"Yes, the idea has much merit," she agreed. "But do not forget that the rope will be high and the test a severe one."

"Be it as high as the stars I would cross it," announced the girl, now in the highest spirits. "You, Beloved, shall stand on the far side, and seeing you I will come as a bird to its mate."

The Maharajah laughed and at once a long and animated discussion took place with hopes running high. Suddenly, however, he became aware that he was treating Ameyra as an equal and that twice she had emphatically contradicted him.

"Woman, you are a mother worthy of your daughter," he said turning towards the doorway. "I must now go and arrange that all is prepared. Put Lamia to bed so that she may sleep untroubled and rise refreshed." He smiled at the girl. "Farewell, Beloved of Kama. All shall be as we desire it, and I will return in the morning."

He left the room and the heavy curtain fell back into its place with soft swishings. It was a long time, however, before Ameyra managed to get Lamia to sleep, but when this was at last accomplished she took two cushions and went out on to the balcony. Here she stood for a long time before sitting cross-legged on the cushions and with palms upturned in her lap. Until the false dawn lit the eastern sky she prayed and meditated, so that she was strengthened and fully prepared to meet the events of the coming day.

CHAPTER X

THE palace finally settled down to uneasy sleep, but with daylight excitement began to rise again. The wager affected not only the city, but the whole state as well, messengers having galloped through the night carrying the news to outlying districts.

In Rajigarh men got up from their beds and crowded into the squares and bazaars where they discussed every aspect of the unique situation, and by common consent a public holiday was declared. Then came streams of country-folk eager not to miss what would turn out to be a most unusual spectacle. The wager had also tickled popular fancy and enhanced the ruler's prestige, but there were a few pessimists who announced that it could not be won.

As soon as he had bathed and eaten a light meal the Maharajah summoned a conference and gave his orders. At first the numerous officials surrounding him stood with grave, worried faces, but they soon broke into smiles when it was explained where the site for the test had been fixed. In spite of this there were many difficulties; the time was very short and bamboos strong enough and high enough had to be found and prepared, and where in all the state was a rope long enough to span even this comparatively narrow inlet? The officer responsible for this work complained but was informed sharply that if he failed to have everything in readiness by the late afternoon he would be dismissed from his post and punished.

Ameyra had also been busy on her own account. Sending for Papeeta, she had ordered that a tight rope must be erected at once in some secluded part of the gardens where Lamia could practice during the morning. This was done and when the Maharajah came to visit the girl he found her missing. Inquiries from Papeeta disclosed that she was down in the gardens and that Ameyra had given strict orders that they were not to be disturbed. He nodded and smiled, and Papeeta with wide, startled eyes watched him go away. She had fully expected him to show surprise and anger that such a woman should give orders in the palace.

Towards the end of the afternoon the stage was set. On either side of the inlet, about a hundred yards from where it ended, two

great bamboo tripods had been erected facing each other across the water and between them was the rope. There had been great difficulty in finding this rope, the palace and the city having been thoroughly combed before two suitable lengths were found hidden under a pile of rubbish in one of the lower palace store rooms. Then followed a hunt to find someone capable of splicing the two. Despairing servants and messengers sought a craftsman, but without success, and it became to look as if the test would have to be cancelled. It was then that the snake charmer had appeared and offered to do the work. When asked what he knew about it he explained that in his youth he had lived in Goa, where he had been a sailor among the white men who lived in the port.

On the western side of the inlet, where the ground sloped gently up from the water, a dense mass of people had begun to collect long before noon. Every man and woman and child who could reach the spot had come from the city and surrounding countryside all determined not to miss the entertainment. On the eastern side an open durbar tent with a dais and sofa had been set up, and it was here the court would assemble, it having been decided that Lamia should walk the rope from west to east with the sun at her back.

There was one aspect about the preliminary work which had caused surprise among those concerned with it, and this was the personal interest taken by the Diwan, who had come out to supervise the work himself, a fact that told against him later in the day.

Rao Chandra and his attendants arrived on the scene by land and the prince took his seat on the sofa, where he sat with an expressionless face while the court gradually assembled about the tent, some coming by water and others by road.

The sun was sinking and the heat abating when across the unruffled water came a procession of boats. In the leading one, under a square canopy of silk, was the Maharajah alone, and he was seen to be dressed as simply as a peasant. Over a white shirt he wore a plain cloth waistcoat and, below, voluminous cotton trousers caught at the ankles, while on his head was a pugri of dark blue cotton. The crowd soon appreciated the reason for this, and there were nodding of heads and murmurs of approval.

"Why does our lord come dressed like one of us?" asked a flighty young wife of her peasant husband.

"Senseless as a Parrot, it is clear to all who have any brains," snapped the man. "He does it in atonement for the foolishness in making this wager, Chit. Is now all clear?"

Several people nearby smiled and the wife scowled as she turned to see who was in the next boat. This contained Lamia, her mother, and Papeeta, all of whom were fully veiled as they sat facing the stern. Gliding across the gilded water the craft neared the inlet, the leading boat swung right and the Maharajah stepped ashore,

while the following boat turned left and the three women were hastily directed into a small tent erected close to the tripod.

The Maharajah stared at the erection and across at the crowd before striding to the durbar tent, where he sat down without looking at his brother-in-law. For a considerable time nothing happened and the large crowd of courtiers and officials waited, keyed up by great but subdued excitement. The thought, uppermost in every mind, was what the prince would do if the girl failed to walk across the rope; that he would permit her to be sent to Rao Chandra was unthinkable, yet if the wager were lost a settlement would have to be made. No one believed that the southerner would willingly renounce his claim. The general feeling among the court was, that if the old Ranee were at home she would have settled the affair in her own way and nobody would have dared to dispute with her. Speculation was also rife as to what she would say and do on her return, and whispered comment was rude and not lacking in humour.

The Maharajah sat wearing a stern expression, with hands resting on his knees, while several officials fussily did nothing in particular close by. Suddenly a gorgeously dressed man on the far bank shouted across that all was ready. Every head now turned towards the ruler to see him give the signal to begin, but before he did so a diversion took place. From behind the tent appeared the snake charmer, scurrying forward as he skilfully evaded many restraining hands. He had neared the dais when two scandalized attendants pounced upon him, but the Maharajah lifted a hand and told them to leave the old man alone.

"What do you want?" he enquired, frowning.

"O Prince of Princes, once before I warned you of danger to her, your heart's desire," answered the ancient standing erect. "It was I who prepared the rope upon which she is to walk. One of my children had shed a skin and this I wove into the strands to avert the evil eye, but it has become known to me that it is without avail." The old man's voice rang out and he seemed to grow taller. "Huzoor, beware of him who sits beside you. All hangs in the balance. I see blood and war and much foulness."

This was too much for the Maharajah, who got to his feet in anger. There were limits to free speech, and this man had exceeded them by speaking publicly of his guest in such a manner.

"You have lost your senses," he exclaimed. "Begone before I have you bastinadoed for your words of ill-omen."

"My lord, I came and spoke because of love for you. If you strike me to the ground in your rage I would still have acted thus. I am old and it matters little what happens to me. It is ever so: men have ears but they will not listen." The man shrugged his thin shoulders and spread out his clawlike hands with a hopeless gesture. "What will be, will be. Who am I to strive to turn aside the heavy arrows of fate? Give the signal, my lord, and may the gods be with you in your time of need."

The old man shook off the two attendants, turned and strode away, an unrepentant prophet. The Maharajah watched him disappear behind the tent on his right, but gave no sign of the spasm of fear that numbed his heart. Rao Chandra had not moved but had heard all that had been said and a smile crept across his face. In the words he read success for himself and for an instant glanced across at the Diwan, who was standing on the far side of the dais. Out of the corner of his eye the Maharajah caught the Diwan's slight nod and look in return, but it made no impression upon him at the time.

The signal for Lamia to begin her ordeal was now given and her lover turned as if to go towards the tripod, but changed his mind and sat down again on the sofa.

In the tent on the western side Ameyra had been giving last instructions to her daughter, while Papeeta had broken down and was weeping quietly in a corner.

"Drink this, it will give you a high courage and banish all doubt," ordered Ameyra holding out a small glass flagon.

Lamia took the sweetened drug and drank it. She showed little sign of strain and handed back the flagon as she wiped her lips.

"The drug is a strong one, but it is not needed. He awaits. Nothing else can matter." Going to the tent flap, she pulled it aside and stared across the inlet. "He is there," she said aloud. "I would that he gave the signal. Why is it delayed?" She dropped the flap and turned to her mother.

"He will soon give it," replied Ameyra, and as she spoke a voice ordered Lamia to come out of the tent.

The girl picked up her short balancing pole and stepped outside. She was dressed in a white, short sleeved jacket and baggy trousers, and her head was uncovered with the glossy hair drawn smoothly back and caught in a knot on the nape of her neck. Running to the tripod she climbed a ladder to the tiny platform in the apex. Here she paused for a moment gazing across the water as the murmuring from the multitude behind her died away into an uneasy rustling. An air of tension grew as she tested and then stepped out on to the rope. Men gripped hands and arms, and held their breath, knowing that here was the making of a legend.

Forty feet above the water, where the boats lay waiting in case she fell, the girl progressed uncertainly at first and then with more confidence. Her head was held high as she passed the halfway mark and the crowd drew in its breath preparatory to roaring its delight at the accomplishment of the feat. Quickening her pace still more, Lamia drew near the platform on the far side, when suddenly a report rang out: a report that was high and sharp and ripped the heavy silence. A woman in the crowd screamed piercingly as she saw the main leg of the tripod on the eastern side snap near the apex, causing the semi-taut rope to sag. Lamia stopped and

balanced wildly as the rope slackened and the whole structure swayed drunkenly towards the water's edge. Dropping her pole, and with a desperate and gallant effort, she almost reached the platform, but a sudden lurch forward of the tripod caused her to sway again and fall. The Maharajah sprang to his feet and dashed forward, while the indrawn breaths of the watching multitude was like the rustling of wind in tree tops.

At the time Lamia's feet had left the rope it had sagged so quickly that she was only a matter of twenty feet above the grass. Landing in a crumpled heap she lay still and there followed a wild stampede towards the scene, but her lover was the first to reach her. Picking the girl up in his arms she was still conscious and managed to smile up at him.

"The water was crossed and the wager won, my lord," she said in a whisper and then lost consciousness.

The horrified courtiers hurriedly moved aside as their prince carried Lamia to the tent, where he laid her tenderly on the sofa which had been vacated by Rao Chandra, who was standing some distance away. Three doctors were already waiting and the Maharajah moved aside to allow them to examine the girl.

A pregnant hush had fallen on the court, but on the far bank the crowd was roaring like wild beasts, and surrounding Rao Chandra his suite talked excitedly and nervously.

With much hissing of breath and soft whispering the doctors carried out a careful examination until the senior, a scrawny old man with a goat-like beard, straightened himself.

"My lord, she is little harmed and will soon recover," he announced cheerfully. "She fell on soft ground and has broken her left leg, although doubtless there will also be bruising and much stiffness."

"The gods be praised a thousand times! A thousand gold mohurs shall be given to the temples," cried the Maharajah turning to a nearby official. "Let the good news be known!"

The man instantly did as he was told, while another shouted the tidings across to the western bank, where the noise at once turned to yells and shouts of pleasure.

Leaving the tent as a boat bringing Ameyra and Papeeta set out from the far bank, the Maharajah strode over to the now fallen tripod and bending down he examined the fracture. It was clear that the thick bamboo leg had been partly cut through, because on one side the edges were clean while the other bristled with frayed strands, some of which were still unparted. Those nearby who saw his face as he stood up, shivered and whispered that never before had they seen such an expression on their ruler's face.

The still unconscious Lamia was placed in a boat on a pile of cushions and with her were her mother, Papeeta and two of the doctors. As soon as the craft was under way the Maharajah called for a horse and galloped back to the palace, followed in due course

by a silent and apprehensive court, although only a few knew that it had not been an accident. The official, Mai Puri, responsible for the general arrangements, had collapsed into a pathetic and nervous wreck incapable of connected speech.

As soon as Lamia was in bed and comfortable in her quarters her lover went to her and no one dared to disturb him. Several hours later, when the excitement was subsiding and the court was beginning to wander off to bed, the Maharajah suddenly returned to his apartments and sent for Mai Puri. The news spread at once, and sleepy men became wideawake again.

Mai Puri had now reached such a state of utter hopelessness that he ceased to care what happened to himself. The prince was leaning against a pillar in his large reception room when the man was ushered in. Salaaming deeply he glanced at his master's expressionless face but read nothing from it.

"O Abomination, what have you to say to me?" enquired the Maharajah.

The man spread out his hands and shrugged his shoulders. There was nothing he could say. He would be held entirely responsible for the accident.

"Huzoor, if I speak the truth you will not believe."

"Speak!"

"My lord I gave orders, but could not oversee all the work because he sent me across to the western bank, and the boat did not wait. My cries, demanding its return, remained unanswered, and I was forced to walk to the other side by land. This ate up much time and when I reached the place the tripod was already raised up and all appeared in order."

"He? Who was he?" asked the Maharajah sharply.

"The Diwan, Huzoor," replied Mai Puri, obviously surprised at the question. "Was it not known to the Heaven Born that he came and gave orders, causing confusion among the men?"

The Maharajah compressed his lips and nodded grimly, while a dangerous light appeared for an instant in his eyes.

"Go, Mai Puri," he ordered. "It is in my mind that the fault does not lie with you. You are fortunate. Tell the Diwan that I wish his presence."

The official joyously departed and those who saw him as he hurried to find the minister marvelled and exchanged glances.

The Maharajah remained leaning against the pillar deep in thought. Things were becoming less confused. So the Diwan had interfered in what was not his business. Why? He then recalled the look passed between his minister and Rao Chandra after the snake-charmer's departure from the tent. And then there was the old man's warning against his brother-in-law. Yes, these things were pointers, but he must be quite sure before he took drastic action. For no particular reason he also remembered the Diwan's discomfiture at Ameyra's hands over the land deal. The Diwan

undoubtedly hated the woman, but he had never shown any hostility towards Lamia.

The minister was outwardly composed, if slightly out of breath, when he came into the room. When summoned he had been in bed and had dressed in considerable haste.

"It saddens me that I drag you from your bed at this hour, my friend," began the Maharajah, fingering his chin. "Since my return here I have thought much, but found no reason for the mischance this afternoon. Have you any thoughts on this thing?"

"I, Huzoor?" replied the old man in surprise. "What should I know concerning the misfortune? It was in my mind that the bamboo was of poor quality and that Mai Puri lacked diligence in not overseeing it. The Heaven Born is also aware that there was little time in which to find great lengths."

"Yes, there was little time," replied the Maharajah reflectively. "It has, however, come to my ears that you showed much interest, going even to that place to oversee the work."

This announcement failed to shake the Diwan's composure.

"Surely, my lord. I went knowing that Mai Puri is a lazy rascal and that speed was needed if all were to be made ready."

"My heart is softened that you, who carry so much on your shoulders, should add yet another burden."

"As the Heaven Born says."

The Maharajah ran a finger up and down his nose and continued to stare into the fierce, proud face before him. He decided to send an arrow at venture.

"Why were you received in audience by the prince, my brother-in-law, before going to oversee the work? It was in my mind that your heart was hard towards him."

It was instantly apparent that this shaft had found its mark. The minister hesitated and his face showed anxiety. What was in the prince's mind? Surely he had no suspicion of the truth?

"It is true that I went and spoke alone with him, my lord," he answered slowly. "He greatly desired to know if the girl could perform the feat."

"That I can well believe," said the Maharajah grimly. "What reply did you give?"

"I said it was in my mind that she could walk upon the rope without falling."

"Good! Did my brother-in-law make answer?"

"No, he ordered me to depart, my lord."

"It is finished. Go, my friend, and may your sleep be peaceful. Send Mai Puri to me."

The Diwan departed vaguely uneasy, and when the official entered the reception room once again his master was seated amid a pile of cushions from where he glanced up and smiled.

"How many men worked upon the eastern bank, Mai Puri?"

"Thirty, my lord."

"Who led the work?"

"A worthy craftsman whose name is Gondal, Huzoor."

"Good! Go at once and arrange that all these men be taken and brought to the courtyard beyond the room."

This order caused a major sensation in the palace, because strong rumours were beginning to circulate that the disaster of the afternoon was not after all an accident. When the thirty trembling and terrified men were at last hustled by Gondal into the courtyard, Mai Puri was waiting, and he addressed them in a low, menacing tone.

"Scum! Devil-like and Unspeakable Villains!" he snarled. "See that you speak the truth to the prince, our lord, if he comes before you. If you weave lies to cloud the truth he will doubtless have you torn to pieces by pincers, and your fingernails ripped out."

The workmen whined and fawned with increasing terror, but Gondal was made of sterner stuff.

"This is child's talk," he said contemptuously. "Our hearts are clean and we have nothing to fear from him who all men know is just."

"Maggots wriggle in your vile heart, O Father of Filth," hissed Mai Puri bearing down upon the man, who held his ground and looked at something over Mai Puri's shoulder. The official spun round.

"They are all here, my lord," he cried in haste.

In the light pouring from the windows and door of the brightly lighted reception room the Maharajah, with a grim smile on his face, was watching the scene.

"That I have seen and also heard. You chatter like a bad-tempered ape, Mai Puri. It is well to guard your tongue when within the hearing of princes." He looked at Gondal standing before the herded workmen. "I heard your words. You do not lack courage. Did these men work upon the eastern bank?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Did you oversee the work?"

"Yes, my lord. We brought the bamboos, and ropes, and all that was necessary. Also we unloaded the durbar tent, and that upon which you sat, Huzoor."

"Good! Did you examine the bamboos before they were roped together?"

"Yes, and they were clean and without blemish, my lord."

"How came it, then, that one was cut, so that when she who walked upon the rope neared this bamboo leg it snapped and all fell to the ground?"

The sincere amazement on Gondal's face showed clearly he knew nothing of this.

"Cut, my lord? It could not have been so."

Mai Puri was about to curse the man for daring to contradict, but the Maharajah stopped him with a wave of his hand.

"I see from your face that you are guiltless. You saw the bamboos tied together?"

"Yes, with my own hands I tested the knots, my lord."

"Did you see the tripod raised up?"

The man hesitated and then shook his head.

"No, my lord. This work was about to begin when the Exalted, the Diwan, called to me to come to the tent, where he made me eat dirt and abuse because the wrong tent was brought. Before the gods, the fault was not mine. I gave no orders for this thing, but only oversaw when it was taken from the cart. When I returned, the tripod had been raised up and all was in order."

"Was Mai Puri present at this time?"

"No, my lord. He was on the far bank."

"Good! You have answered well and clearly. Stand aside!"

The man did as he was told and the Maharajah moved forward a few paces and stared at the huddled group of men, whose dark faces were fantastic in the bright light and heavy shadows. For several moments there was silence before he spoke in a voice that was calm and almost soothing.

"You have heard what Gondal, your headman, has said. Who among you raised up the tripod?"

The crowd shivered, but no one moved or spoke. This was too much for Mai Puri to endure in silence.

"Speak, Devil's Spawn," he commanded furiously. "Are you without hearing that you do not give answer when our lord, the prince, speaks?"

The group surged uneasily and then, one by one, seven men came forward a few steps and clung together like a cluster of badly scared monkeys. Their dark eyes, fixed on the prince, were wide and crazed with fear. The Maharajah, who appreciated their feelings, proceeded to calm them by promising that, if they spoke the truth, there should be no punishment but even rewards. When this sank into their numbed brains it had the desired effect. Gondal was watching their faces closely and saw one large and brawny workman struggling to overcome his nervousness and speak. Catching him by the arm, he nodded encouragingly, and the man haltingly told his story as he kept his face averted from the prince.

It appeared that before leaving the palace this man and two others had been heavily bribed by a minor official whom none of them knew. They had been ordered partly to sever the main leg of the tripod, and it was explained that both Mai Puri and Gondal would be temporarily absent when they were to do the deed. The signal to start was to be made when the Diwan called Gondal to the tent, where all but seven men were to be engaged upon erecting it.

"You, Gondal, were called," said the workman with growing confidence. He then pointed to two men. "These men and I ordered the other four men to turn away and attend to the great pegs in the ground. The work was then done and none saw it."

"Who cut the leg?" enquired the Maharajah.

"It was I, my lord," replied the speaker, glancing for a moment at the prince. "The two with me watched to see that the others were turned away during that time."

"What then befell?"

"When it was done I called loudly saying that all were indolent and that the tripod must be raised swiftly, my lord."

The Maharajah nodded grimly while the crowd watched his face with fascinated attention.

"You are shameless, and most foul villains worthy of slow and painful deaths, but as was my promise there shall be rewards." The Maharajah turned to Mai Puri. "Give each of the three men one mohur, and see to it that they and their families are taken beyond our borders. They shall not return. It is finished."

Half an hour later, at just before one in the morning, the Maharajah summoned several of his highest army officers and went to Rao Chandra's quarters. Here he faced his half-dressed and very indignant guest. The two men stared at each other, one outwardly calm and self-controlled, and the other petulant and nervous. Without any preamble the Maharajah bluntly told what he knew and accused his brother-in-law of conspiring with the Diwan to bring dishonour on his name. Rao Chandra listened and spluttered furiously.

"You are mad to utter such words," he howled. "It was that if the wager were lost I should lie with this girl. Why then should I plot to harm her?"

The Maharajah glared contemptuously at the fat, angry face before him.

"The ways of evil men are past understanding, and your heart is darker than a moonless night," he said in a cold fury. "You and I are as water to fire. I am no fool and know now that to blacken my face you plotted this deed with my Diwan. Curbing your lust for the girl you would have sacrificed her to your boastful vanity. All Hindustan knows your foul habits and my palace is unblest by your presence." The Maharajah turned to his amazed officers. "See to it that this man leaves the palace within the hour. Take him to the frontier and be rid of him."

Striding from the room he went to deal with the Diwan, but here he was thwarted. The old man had already left the palace and was hastening out of the state, having forced Mai Puri to disclose what had taken place in the courtyard.

CHAPTER XI

WHEN the Maharajah stormed back to his apartment the palace resembled an angry beehive. Even Ameyra, dozing near Lamia,

who lay asleep in the inner room of her quarters, was disturbed by the commotion. Quietly leaving the room she went down the passage to find out what was happening. On learning that Rao Chandra was in the process of being ejected and that the Diwan had fled, she scandalized everyone within hearing by her loud expressions of joy.

When Lamia awoke at half-past seven in the morning Ameyra told her what had occurred, expecting her daughter to be surprised and pleased. Lamia, however, was gravely alarmed, and when the Maharajah, summoned at her urgent request, came into the room she ordered her mother to leave. Struggling into a sitting position she stared at her lover with starry eyes: his own were heavy from lack of sleep and it was obvious he was ill-humoured.

"My lord, what have you done?" cried the girl at once. "Is it true that the prince, your guest, has been cast out of the palace?"

He nodded in reply and stared gloomily down at the girl.

"Bapri Bap! What misfortune! My heart is as ice because of this," she wailed. "Has there not been enough evil done that it must be added to?"

"The palace is cleaner for his going," replied the Maharajah sulkily. "He was an unfriend of mine."

"Men, what fools they are!" cried Lamia angrily. "Even you, my lord, are but a brawling, rowdy boy, boastful and lacking in dignity. What of me? All Hindustan will say that these things were because of me. Men will curse my name and say evil things of me—me who would have all the world for a friend." Her voice suddenly changed from anger to pleading. "Recall him, Heart of Hearts, and make your peace. The wager was won. What else matters? What also of the Diwan? He is as an old and faithful servant and yet, because of one thing, you throw him off like a snake with its skin. Recall them and let all be as it was before."

"No, I will not! I am the Prince of Rajilal and my face has been blackened," replied the Maharajah stubbornly.

"If you will not do it for my sake then consider this may mean war," continued Lamia, still pleading.

"I care not. He and his people are soft and as women. They are no warriors as are we Rajputs."

The girl stared up into her lover's face and saw he meant what he had said. In spite of the pain from her bruises and stiffness she drew herself up proudly and lifted her chin.

"I am no longer of any account," she announced bitterly. "You are Prince of Rajilal and I am as I am. You forget, my lord, that others also have pride. In durbar you offered my virtue to this prince. I do not condemn the fault, but I am no dancing girl to be flung at will to any and all such. I will also depart." She pointed towards the curtain. "Go, my lord! Leave me in such peace as remains. I am a blasted tree upon a hillside in whose shadow rampant devils play. Go, I say, go!"

The Maharajah stared down into her face and knew that the girl had passed away and now it was a woman who sat among the cushions. He hesitated and then, turning his back, hurried from the room. As the curtain fell back into its place, Lamia buried her face in a cushion and wept. It was indeed true that he no longer loved her or else he would not have gone in such a fashion, but in her distress she forgot that she was dealing with a prince who took matters of honour a great deal more seriously than did common men.

Ameyra, waiting at the far end of the passage, saw the departing prince's face and knew that something unusual had taken place. She hurried back to her daughter.

"What befell?" she demanded. "Why did he leave so soon, and with a face dark as a storm?"

"He loves me no more," wailed the girl, lifting her face from the cushion. "We leave the palace at once."

Ameyra promptly lost her temper and began a violent scene, during which she poured recriminations, angry abuse, and accusations of insanity upon Lamia, but this had a strangely calming effect upon the girl. She lay back and whenever her mother paused for breath she repeated her statement. Papeeta, the two old nurses, and a doctor now came in, and Lamia told them of her decision, whereupon Papeeta burst into tears, the nurses scolded, and the wise old doctor, with twinkling eyes, tugged his thin beard as he watched the wrangling.

Lamia got her own way and within two hours was carried in a litter to her mother's house. This fresh and intriguing situation caused another spate of agitated comment in the palace, but the Maharajah, when told of it, merely grunted and turned away.

For several days nothing happened. Lamia's minor fracture of her lower leg was mending; the Maharajah continued to sulk in his rooms; and the whole state waited apprehensively, knowing that this was a lull before a storm which might develop into something alarming.

The next event was the news that Rao Chandra had sent a party of men to Benares, where they had kidnapped his sister and carried her off to his state in the South. This was followed by an abusive letter in which Rao Chandra stated that his sister would be divorced, and, on his return from Agra, war declared on Rajilal. The contents of this letter were not made public, but Ameyra's spies in the palace brought the gist of it to her.

Lamia was lying on a bed in the shade on the roof and had recovered her spirits, knowing that it was only a matter of time before she and her lover were reunited. She was embroidering a piece of white silk when her mother hurried up the steps. A glance at Ameyra's face showed that she had important news.

"He has come, or sent word?" she cried, dropping her work.

Ameyra shook her head and poured out her story. Lamia's face clouded for a moment and then cleared.

"I was right," she declared. "I told him he was a boasting, brawling boy, and this is the fruit of his naughtiness."

"Will you send for him?"

"No, he shall come to me as he will do. It was a lover's quarrel, but he shall ask my forgiveness." Lamia took up her work again and bent her head over it. "My mother, the time has arrived to stop this matter before it grows too large and serious."

"What will you do?" enquired the elder woman, smiling. "There will be war and all will know it is because of you and your beauty. Now that he is to be divorced, surely you will become a queen as was foretold."

Lamia looked up and shook her head.

"I have no wish to be a queen, but if I bear him a son then I will consider the matter. Now other and more important things are toward. I have thought much and prepared for this moment as I have lain on my bed. To-morrow, secretly in the dawn, we will go to Agra, and there I will speak with the Emperor, and he shall tell these princes to behave and refrain from brawling."

Her mother's eyes became round, her mouth fell open, and she gave a shriek of amazement.

"Now I know you are insane! Go to Agra? Speak with the Emperor Akbar himself? It is impossible! He would not receive you!"

"It is you who speak without thought, my mother. It is well known that all men, and any man with just complaint, may speak with him in public audience."

"You are a woman, my child."

Lamia laughed gaily.

"I hear that he is not averse to fair women. I will also match his wisdom with what little I have. It is in my mind that he will not look with favour upon war between these states, there being other troubles in the South. He, my love, told me the Emperor desired him to send troops for some war."

Ameyra looked down at her daughter and shook her head in despair.

"How strange you are and unlike other girls. You have the favour of princes and treat them without respect. You love him and yet spurn him. And now you refuse a throne and yet would face him in Agra. I am bewildered. If you do this thing you will be as a deer facing a hungry tiger."

"Even so, my mother, but I have the little sharp horns of my wit, and the armour of my beauty," replied Lamia, highly amused.

Ameyra turned away and paced up and down the roof deep in thought. Actually she was not averse to her daughter going to see the Emperor, who, if he were attracted, might assist in Ameyra's plan to make her daughter a queen. She also fully appreciated that,

if her daughter slipped away from Rajilal, it would bring the Maharajah an acute realization of his loss. Yes, the idea was a good one.

While these two women were talking, the old Ranee Jadonji, in Benares, was lying sick in a small palace on the outskirts of the city. When she had been told of her daughter-in-law's kidnapping while on her way to a small temple, she became so enraged that she had had a minor stroke. The old lady, however, was tougher than she looked and soon threw off the effects, especially when she heard what had been taking place in Rajigarh during her absence. In spite of protests that she should rest, she rose up and hastened back to her son to tell him what she thought of such undignified and scandalous behaviour.

In the cold, grey hour before the dawn, Lamia, Ameyra, and a small but efficient retinue slipped secretly away on their five-day journey to Agra. The same day, in the cool of the evening, the Maharajah, in disguise, came to the house and demanded to see Ameyra. A grim and ancient gatekeeper barred his way, telling him that his mistress could see no one. Impatiently the Maharajah disclosed his identity to the astonished old man, who now explained that mother and daughter had left that morning for some destination known only to themselves.

Utterly confounded and dismayed by this news, the Maharajah returned to the palace in an even more chastened mood than he had left it. He then comforted himself with the thought that it would be a simple matter to find out where they had gone. This, however, did not turn out to be the case because, in spite of the most searching enquiries, no news could be discovered. To add to his discomfiture there arrived an imperious summons from the Emperor to go instantly to Agra.

He cursed and fumed as he paced up and down his room. Things indeed had gone awry. Lamia was missing; a possible war lay ahead; there was confusion in the palace, which now lacked the strong hand of the Diwan; and, finally, the summons to the Imperial Court. There had, in fact, been only one bright spot during the whole disastrous period and that was the Diwan had been caught and brought back to the city. The Maharajah had no intention of punishing or harming him unduly, but he had had him put for a few days in the deepest and darkest dungeon in the palace, there to learn the unwisdom of plotting against princes.

Lamia and her mother travelled slowly, but covered considerable distances each day. In a heavy cart, without purdah curtains and surrounded by their personal baggage, the two women sat under a heavy awning of yellow silk. They passed the time either dozing among the cushions, or commenting on rural life with its peasants working in the fields, browsing cattle and varied animal and bird life. Sometimes the road was good and smooth, and sometimes it became little more than a rough country track winding across the

plain. Trees were scattered, but now and again there were thick clumps of dark mango trees, or a few twisted pipals shading some forgotten and neglected shrine.

At noon they rested in the shade. The villages were not numerous and generally lay well off the road, but towards nightfall Ameyra insisted upon their spending the night either in a town or a large village and not at a camping ground. When Lamia enquired the reason for this, her mother replied that it was because of the danger from thugs.

"What are thugs?" asked her daughter when the subject was first mentioned. "Are they robbers?"

"Indeed they are, O Untravelled One. They are ravening as tigers, slaying the innocent traveller, robbing his body, and burying it by the wayside."

"Why, then, did you refuse to allow that family to join us this morning, my mother? The greater the number in our party the less fear we should have."

"It was because there were too many men in that family, and such is the manner of thugs. Pretending to be a simple family, or group of nervous travellers, they attach themselves to such as we and on arriving at some distant, lonely spot they pounce, strangle, and rob us."

"If such foul things can be, why does the Emperor not send soldiers to seek them out?"

"He is too occupied with wars, and making new laws, my daughter. You will learn that we do not turn to princes for aid, because the people in this land must protect the people when the need becomes great." Ameyra sighed as she turned her head and stared across the almost uninhabited countryside through which they were passing. "It saddens me when I consider how this fair land is ravaged. When pillaging armies are not hastening or fighting across it, drought kills and the peasants starve, so that few remain to cultivate the soil. It often seems to me that those who live close to the earth are but little above the beasts they tend."

And so, talking and discussing life and kindred subjects, they drew near Agra. Ameyra, having been lavish in her expenditure, they moved in great comfort and were received in lodging-houses as important guests. In a small town, on the last stage of the journey where they were to spend the night, they found the place seething with excitement. Their portly and amiable lodging-house keeper informed them the reason was that a distinguished stranger had just arrived to spend the night with the senior mullah. This stranger was unique, being one of the white men from the South who was on his way to Agra to discuss his faith with the Emperor, who was well known to be a free-thinker and tolerant towards all forms of religion.

"What is he like?" asked Lamia excitedly. "Is he tall and handsome and white as snow, as I have heard these people are?"

"No," answered the man doubtfully. "His face is dark and he wears a heavy beard, but one did tell me that he showed the skin on his breast and it was white as milk."

"Ah hi, I would that I could see and speak with this man!"

Ameyra also expressed a desire to meet the stranger, and as a result the lodging-house keeper, wishing to please his wealthy guests, said he would see what could be done in the matter.

Father Ridolfo Aquaviva, the young and clever priest from the Jesuits in Goa, had washed and eaten an evening meal and was becoming bored with his host, a plump, narrow-minded mullah, who was very talkative and dogmatic. When a breathless messenger arrived saying that two high-born ladies wished to talk with the Jesuit, Father Ridolfo at once agreed to go with the man, in spite of his host's unconcealed disapproval.

Lamia and her mother received him on an upper verandah and greeted him with flowery politeness and much interest. Tall, bespectacled, and wearing a dusty-black, long coat with a girdle, he returned their greetings.

"We are honoured a thousand times by your graciousness," began Lamia. "I have heard that you journey to Agra to talk with the Emperor Akbar. My mother and I also go to have audience with him, although, doubtless, on different matters."

"I have been sent to show the light of my faith to your Emperor," answered Father Ridolfo, following the girl's example and using the new Urdu language. "Why do you, who are women, go to speak with him?"

Lamia explained in some detail and the priest listened attentively but with increasing gravity.

"It is wise that you go to ask the Emperor to prevent this war," he said when Lamia paused. "It is a shameful thing that these two princes should fight over you, who are but a daughter of sin."

"Daughter of sin!" cried Lamia, greatly astonished. "What do you mean?" She had never considered her relations with the Maharajah anything but perfectly normal.

"You live with this man, and lie with him, and yet are not his wife. We, of my faith, believe this to be an evil thing."

"Evil? Why? I love him and he loves me. There is no sin, no harm," replied the girl bewildered.

"You have taken this prince from his wife and it is because of this trouble has come to both of you," suggested Father Ridolfo gently.

Lamia, with a puzzled frown, stared at this outspoken man as Ameyra turned upon him.

"You speak bold words, my friend," she announced sharply. "Will you repeat them to the Emperor, who has an assorted harem? Will you also accuse him of being without faith because his wife is a Hindu and he is Mahomedan? Will you——"

The Jesuit stopped her with a wave of his hand.

"My sister, you know nothing of my faith which is based on love and service."

"To whom, priest?"

"To one God and man."

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

"You speak easily of love. It is strange you condemn my daughter because she loves one man."

Before Father Ridolfo could reply, Lamia interrupted.

"Like all priests you speak in riddles to confuse the simple mind," she said coldly. "You have called me an evil name, but I forgive it knowing that holy men, whatever their faith, are as alike as two beans. To them love, without a priest in attendance is lust. Love, what do such as you know of it? You are a man who speaks with the lips and not from the heart." Lamia laughed sardonically. "Do as we say and give offerings, such do they all tell us. Not only priests are wise in this land. Such wisdom as I possess I gained from living men and not from dusty writings of those long dead. We thank you for your graciousness in coming to this house, but the hours now grows late. Is it permitted that before you depart I may test your wisdom, priest?"

Father Ridolfo, who was astonished and amused by this frankness, smiled and nodded.

"I have two questions. The first is: what is more deadly than poison?"

The man stroked his beard as he considered and stared down into Lamia's clear and steady eyes.

"I do not know," he said at last.

"The tongue is more deadly than poison."

"That is a shrewd thrust," replied the Jesuit laughing, as he lifted an arm as if to ward off a sword cut. "What is the second?"

"It touches your faith closely. What is darker than death?"

Again the man shook his head.

"I will not now give the answer. Ask the Emperor and if he does not reply I will do so when we meet again. This question is worthy of consideration. Farewell."

When Father Ridolfo had gone, Lamia, with troubled eyes, turned to her mother.

"I am sure that man is very wise and good, but he knows nothing of love and women. Am I, indeed, lacking in modesty and virtue?"

"No, he was eaten up by the strength of his strange faith," replied Ameyra quickly. "Many priests came to our home in Ombra and all were drunk with religious zeal, some crying out that all pleasure was sin, and others that Hell awaited all who loved and enjoyed what the gods gave them. You have heard them and know I speak the truth. Were it not for their learning and wisdom, priests would indeed be an infliction to the simple-minded."

"Yes, that is all true, my mother, but he said I had stolen my lover from his wife. What of this?"

"It is entirely without sense. Let us consider the matter with open minds and end this stupidity. I do not know if the prince still loves, or indeed, ever loved his wife, who as you know is like a plant deprived of light. She is sweet-natured, and obedient, and doubtless he has affection for her.

"I have known many men and nearly all were alike in passion. Real love never dies, but it is desire that fades, lacking the waters of excitement. Passion to remain strong must be also pruned as we do our bushes. Do not forget, my daughter, it is the truth that a man may still love and yet have lost desire, and when this occurs he turns to other fruit. Were you not as you are he would look in time towards other women, and will do so if you do not heed my warnings. Trouble comes when a woman realizes her man's desire for her burns low and she, lacking in wisdom, cries out that he loves her no more. Foolish as an ape she torments him and so changes his love to resentment, and sometimes to hate, because love and hate are twins born of our emotions. Man's nature is as it is and cannot be altered by loud-voiced priests, or a woman's shrill bewailings."

"Ah ho, it is in your mind that one day he will no longer yearn for me?" cried Lamia in distress.

She had the highest regard for her mother's teachings where men were concerned and did not doubt that she spoke the absolute truth.

"I did not say this, but if you are as wise as you showed yourself to be before this priest, Heart of Hearts, you will continue to treat this prince as a high-spirited horse is handled. When he wishes to bolt with his passion you will rein him in gently but firmly. Petting him and giving him sweet things, he must obey you in this, because women such as we are not slaves in the matter like most in this land.

"Much of this you know, but it is well to consider what occurs to a rider who allows his horse a free rein. The gallop is exciting and pleasurable, but at last the animal will trip, or cast off his rider, and be free of him when the thirst for speed is gone. Such it is with men."

Lamia nodded thoughtfully and there was a long pause.

"I know this to be wise beyond all, but it is not easy to behave thus with him," she said at last. "One thought lies wriggling like a snake in my mind, and it is that there may be evil in my love."

"This is foolishness worthy only of a peasant woman. There is only good."

"But it is true, my mother, that because of me this trouble has come to him. If I had not gone to the palace all would have been well and as before."

Ameyra controlled herself with admirable patience.

"Forget this priest's idle, ill-considered talk. Remember that if the gods are kind you shall bear him many sons, and what are they but the choice fruits of love and desire?"

Again Lamia nodded.

"It is late and I am weary. Carry me to my bed."

"Yes, let us to bed. To-morrow there will be much to be done in Agra."

CHAPTER XII

HIGH mounds and the outlines of forgotten streets are all that now remain of what was Agra when Akbar was building the new city of Fatehpur Sikri twenty-three miles away. Situated not far from the muddy banks of the Jumna river and between where the Fort and the Taj Mahal now stand, the old city was a poor thing when compared to the glory of the new one, but the streets were still busy and colourful, although many inhabitants had already moved out into new quarters.

In the fierce heat of the noonday sun, Ameyra and Lamia, both wearing three-quarter veils, sat in their cart as it lumbered into a dusty and untidy courtyard of their lodging. As soon as they had settled into their rooms, Ameyra at once set about making inquiries, and it was not long before she discovered that the Emperor and the court had moved some time before to the nearly finished city. This was as unexpected as it was disconcerting, and meant that fresh accommodation would have to be found in Fatehpur Sikri. The new city, as far as the inhabitants were concerned, was only partly laid-out and built, and as a result space was limited because everyone who was able had followed the court and many were actually camping on the outskirts.

While her mother was dashing to and fro, disturbing and questioning short-tempered people resting during the heat, Lamia had her bed drawn close to a window from where she could look down on a street. She was still unable to move any distance without assistance, but was determined to see as much as she could of this city of which she had heard so much.

The street was one in the gold and silversmiths' ward and the uneven roadway was lined with small, open-fronted shops. Each had one or more showcases in which lay displayed heavy silver necklaces, anklets and girdles, slim bracelets, and tiny nose roses, and curious pendants set with flawed gems or hung about with large, distorted pearls. Lamia could see beyond several of the showcases into the tiny interiors, where craftsmen squatted before anvils with a charcoal fire on one side and tools of their trade on the other.

Because it was still the hour of midday rest only a few people moved abroad, but further up the street someone was celebrating a marriage feast and a loud band was playing out of sight in a courtyard. On the dusty air was a strange mephitic atmosphere which the girl knew and loved. It was made up of a mixture of

rancid butter, spices, drains, unwashed clothes, hot bodies, and cow dung smoke.

Lamia was becoming a little bored and was about to lie back among the cushions when she caught sight of a portly figure coming up the street. Leaning further out of the window she stared fixedly at the man, who was mopping his face as he ambled along in the dust. Yes, she was sure it was a wealthy Hindu merchant who lived close to them at Ombra and had been in the habit of making presents to Lamia of strange sweetmeats brought back from the North when she was a child.

"Ah ho, Rugbar Ram!" she called excitedly.

The man stopped abruptly and gazed about to see who had called his name.

"It is I, Lamia, who call you, Rugbar Ram. Look up, for I am here!"

The merchant trotted forward and, looking up, saw the girl. At once a broad grin spread across his plump face.

"By all the gods it is indeed you, my child!" he cried excitedly. "Why are you here in Agra?"

"Come to me and I will tell you," replied the girl, laughing.

The man nodded and turned into the courtyard, while Lamia found her crutch and managed to hobble out on to the rear verandah to greet him as he puffed up the stairs.

"Welcome as water to the thirsty is the sight of a friend in a strange place and afar-off," said the girl in greeting.

"Indeed that is true and never more so than now. But this meeting is beyond all amazement. It was in my mind that you were now a court favourite in Rajilal, my daughter. Why, then, are you here and why do you walk with that?" He pointed to the crutch.

"Be seated, O Most Welcome," answered the girl, pointing to a wooden bench as she sat down on one end of it. "I will tell much of my strange tale."

Rugbar Ram sat down, beaming with pleasure and exuding a strong scent of jasmine.

"I pant to hear what has befallen, but first tell me what of that gushing of charm and wisdom, your mother?"

"She lies with me here in Agra, and will soon return to this place."

"That is good news, but I am still dazed by this most excellent meeting. Tell the story which doubtless savours of some devilry because you were ever an imp."

Lamia laughed gaily and then proceeded to explain much that had happened since she went to Rajilal, and the merchant leaned back against the wall nodding and chuckling as he listened.

"And so, secretly, and in the morning, we stole away and came here to speak with the Emperor that he may chide these quarrelsome princes," said the girl, as she broke off her narrative.

"By Ganesh, Shiva and Suraji, it is a tale such as dreams are made of!" exclaimed Rugbar Ram, sincerely amazed. "It was long in my mind that you were born to greatness, but never did it come to me that you would be a living legend, because, without doubt, the tale is already being told in all the bazaars of Hindustan."

"I would willingly forego all could it be as it was before the pestuous prince came to us," answered the girl a little sadly.

Rugbar Ram grinned again and continued to mop his damp brows.

"Your mother is very wise, my child, but it would appear that she has not told you of one thing. I have moved up and down this land and know that the Seats of the Great are not so comfortable as they look, their cushions often being stuffed with sharp thorns. Those who sit close to princes sometimes also feel those thorns. You——"

The merchant broke off suddenly because at that moment Ameyra, hot and flustered, appeared on the scene, but she instantly forgot her anxieties in the surprise and pleasure at seeing her old friend. A stream of flowery but sincere greetings followed, and Ameyra started a flood of questions about her old home and acquaintances, which the merchant did his best to answer. Then she remembered her present difficulties and gave vent to them. It appeared that no suitable accommodation was available in Fatehpur Sikri; that a proper carrying chair for Lamia's use at the public audience could not be found; and, finally, it was said that the Emperor was in an evil mood.

"Indeed he is! You have not heard the news?" exclaimed Rugbar Ram, much surprised.

"No, what is it?" demanded both women.

"A most foul deed has been done. Adham Khan has slain the Imperial Diwan in the palace. I am on my way back to Ombra from a journey to Kabul and had words only for the Diwan's ear. Now I am as a lost goat, not knowing to whom to deliver the message. It is, indeed, a calamity. May this upstart, this ungrateful son of a devil, rot in Hell!"

"What was this villain?" asked Ameyra.

"He was the son of the Emperor's much-beloved old nurse, known as the Moon-foster Mother. In the past, this Adham Khan and the Emperor were as brothers, but eaten up with pride and lust for power this rogue dared to consider even the Imperial throne. Two nights ago he went to the palace with some cut-throats seeking the Emperor, but found, instead, the Diwan reading peacefully from the Koran. Without reason he slew him."

Both women cried out in horror and asked for more information.

"Ah hi, the Emperor proved himself a man indeed!" asserted the merchant with deep satisfaction. "This swashbuckler, this most horrid ruffian, then went even to the harem seeking his master. There the Emperor felled him with a single blow from his fist and

taking him in his arms flung him from the walls on to the rocks below."

"A jackal's death for a jackal," said Lamia through clenched teeth. "What then?"

"Indeed a fitting death, but that is not all. Adham Khan was not dead and the Emperor, seeing this, ordered that he should be brought up again. After embracing him, the Emperor cast him down again, so that men stood with open mouths. He then turned aside and wept, because he had loved this man. The Emperor's mood is black because of these things." Rugbar Ram broke off and got to his feet. "But the time passes and already much has been lost and I must depart, although with great reluctance. It has come into my mind that I can aid you in your difficulties, my friend," he observed, turning to Ameyra. "In the new city there is one who is as a brother to me and will, if I ask it of him, doubtless receive you in his apartments. He is Naquib Khan, who is beloved of the Emperor and reads to him, because, as you know, the Emperor does not read or write. Naquib Khan is a man of much charm and learning, and will whisper in the Imperial ear concerning your desires."

Ameyra gave a cry of pleasure at this news.

"A thousand thanks! O happy hour that you looked from the window and saw this best of friends, my daughter," she continued, clapping her hands with delight. "The sun shines again and my heart is light."

"It is nothing," replied the merchant, moving towards the stairs. "I will send within the hour and to-morrow will return here with Naquib Khan's reply. It also comes to my mind that if you speak with the Emperor his face should be watched and his mood discovered. The murder has caused a blackness of the soul, and they say in the North: 'We know what Heaven or Hell may bring, but no man knows the mind of a king.'"

The next morning, Rugbar Ram came again, and was eagerly greeted by the impatient women.

"Is all well?" called Lamia from the verandah, as he appeared in the courtyard.

The man nodded vigorously as he climbed the stairs, and then told them how Naquib Khan had replied stating that he would welcome the visitors.

Ameyra had packed and made all arrangements in advance, so that the journey to Fatehpur Sikri was begun within a short time.

The sun was sinking and the somewhat arid landscape was glowing in a golden haze when the two women in their cart drew near to the city. The massive, six-sided Agra Gate, crowned with small cupolas, was a patchwork of light and purple shadows when the cart halted beneath the vast gateway. Here, they were met by a tall, dignified young man, who said he had been sent by Naquib Khan to guide the guests to his residence.

Moving through the gate, past the lounging guards, they mingled with colourful crowds who surged in and out of the city. Walking beside the cart, the young man began to point out the principal sights to the interested and eager women. First came two lines of houses, then another gateway named the Naubat Khana, beyond which, on the right, was the Mint and on the left the Treasury. The guide then indicated the huge Hall of Public Audience and, nearby, the Hall of Private Audience. These buildings were profusely carved and filled Lamia with delight.

"That is the Ank Michauli," said the guide pointing toward another building. "It is there the Emperor plays hide-and-seek when his heart is light."

Lamia was so pleased to hear this strange information that she ordered the cart to halt.

"Can we inspect this place?" she cried. "With whom does he play the game?"

"With those in the harem," explained the guide solemnly. "Now such frivolity is at an end because he is sad and restless, and gloom hangs over this city like a thunder-cloud. It is not possible for you to see this place."

The girl frowned and hesitated before ordering the cart to proceed. Suddenly she lifted her head and stared at the young man over the edge of her veil.

"I swear by our gods that before I leave this city I will get him to play this game with me," she announced firmly.

Ameyra gasped and then laughed, and the guide glared disapprovingly, shrugged his shoulders, and pointed out a fresh sight. This was a delightful five-storied colonnade, each storey stepped up until the uppermost was but a single cupola placed on four slender columns. Shortly afterwards they turned to the right, past the southern wall of the Great Mosque, and the cart rumbled into a small courtyard which was a part of a much larger building.

"Here lives my father, the Illustrious Naquib Khan, reader and historian to the Emperor," announced the young man with pompous gravity as the cart halted.

"Your father?" exclaimed Ameyra in surprise.

"Yes, indeed! I am his only son and one day, if Allah wills it, I shall also instruct at this court. Be pleased to descend."

The guests were taken to the women's quarters where they were received by Fatima, Naquib Khan's Persian wife. Fatima, although past middle age, still retained her figure and some of her good looks. Her pale, rather square face was faintly lined and clearly showed high breeding. When her husband had told her of the impending arrival of two Hindu women guests she showed no particular resentment, having long been used to the court which welcomed many faiths, making no discrimination between them. It was, however, somewhat different when Hindus were to live in the house.

"Welcome," she said politely. "Doubtless you are both weary from the journey. Honour me by taking refreshment."

Ameyra and Lamia murmured suitable replies as they sat down on a pile of cushions in a spacious, cool room scented with rose perfume. When Lamia unfastened her veil and allowed it to fall aside, the Persian, in spite of her training and natural good manners, was unable to suppress an exclamation of astonishment.

"You are indeed lovelier than a freshly bloomed rose," she cried, putting a hand to her mouth.

"Your exquisite flattery enchants me," replied the girl, demurely lowering her eyes and picking a small bunch of grapes from a nearby dish.

Fatima now turned to Ameyra, who had also removed her veil, and she realized that here was a woman to be reckoned with, although unable to place her socially.

"My husband says you are friends of an old friend and that you come from the South," she observed in low, even tones.

Ameyra nodded and smilingly told her hostess how she had lived at Ombra, and was about to explain that she was now living in Rajigarh when a curtain at the far end of the room was moved aside and Naquib Khan entered. Both women recognized him at once from the likeness to his son. Tall and thin, with a studious face and a pair of grey-blue eyes, he was wearing a tight coat of blue cloth with a loosely wound pugri on his grey hair. Spreading out his hands, as he neared his guests, he bowed and smiled.

"Your arrival was made known to me. You are welcome as rain to dry earth," he said in a deep voice as he sat down facing Ameyra. "It is to be hoped that my wife has received you with due respect?"

"Indeed she has and your graciousness melts our hearts with gratitude," replied Ameyra. "Without your timely aid we should have been as sheep lost on a hillside."

"It is nothing," replied the man, his eyes fixed on Lamia. "It is we who are honoured above many."

Both the hosts now invited their guests to partake of fruit, sweetmeats and a strangely flavoured sherbet, while the conversation turned easily upon the recent journey and what the mother and daughter thought of the new city. In due course, Naquib Khan excused himself and Fatima took charge of the guests, leading them to their quarters. When they had bathed, changed their clothes, and generally settled down in their luxurious rooms, they were summoned to the evening meal. This was served in a long, narrow room hung with exquisite old Persian brocades. Fatima was delighted when Ameyra admired them, praising highly their fine workmanship and great beauty.

"They were marriage gifts from my father in Khaf," she explained, as they sat down and were joined by Naquib Khan and his son, Kais Khan.

When the excellent but simple meal was over and the heavily sweetened tea, peach brandy, and other drinks were placed on low tables, the host leaned back and began to puff at his hookah. Ameyra knew that the time had arrived to give an account of themselves and realized she must tell the unembroidered truth, because if she failed to do so her host would undoubtedly learn it from Rugbar Ram, or some other source.

Leaning on one elbow among the cushions she began her tale. Fatima and her husband listened with absorbed attention, but Kais Khan only heard a portion of it because he was much too interested in Lamia, whose beauty fascinated him. He sat staring at her and she, fully aware of his regard, pretended not to notice it as she nibbled a few almonds and fat, dried grapes steeped in sugar.

"By the Blessed Prophet himself, on whom be peace, it is a strange story," cried Naquib Khan when the telling was done. "Had I not heard it from your lips I would not have believed." He broke off and chuckled. "This prince, Rao Chandra, is here, but the Emperor being sick at heart will not see him, although he was summoned to the court. He is loose-tongued and it is known that he has quarrelled with the Prince of Rajilal, who has also been called by the Emperor."

"He comes here?" cried Lamia, alarmed. "Bapri Bap, that is unwelcome news!"

"What has Rao Chandra said?" enquired Ameyra quickly.

Again Naquib Khan chuckled, and laid aside his mouthpiece as he rubbed his lips.

"He has given out that he was flung from the palace in Rajigarh like an unwanted menial. When asked for some reason he is reported to have said a woman was concerned." Her host glanced across at Lamia. "That must have been you, my daughter. Many smiled when they heard this because the prince is not unknown to us. But much is chit-chat and if I believed all that is whispered here at the court I should indeed be a fool." He suddenly became grave as he turned to Ameyra again. "You have heard of the foul deed that was done here?"

Ameyra nodded as she smoothed out a fold in her silken dress and the man continued.

"Because of it the Emperor is in a black mood and it is an ill-favoured time that these princes should stand before him. Before Allah he is a just man, but when the heart is stirred by sorrow, blood flows easily to the brain."

"I must speak with the Emperor at once," announced Lamia eagerly. "I will make the path smooth and all will be well."

Naquib Khan shook his head doubtfully and smiled at the girl. "You are courageous beyond all doubt, as has already been shown, but do not forget that he does not look with much favour upon women and cares less for their words. Also there has been no public audience for several days."

"I do not care! I will speak with him even if I have to seek him in his bedroom. I come with high and just complaint, begging no favours for myself. He will listen when I beg that he orders these princes to behave."

Fatima smiled, while her husband roared with laughter as he slapped a thigh.

"Well said, but who are you, child, that you should order princes to be taught wisdom? Never before have I heard such words from a woman," he cried, patting his hands together.

Lamia drew herself up, lifted her chin, and compressed her lips.

"This is no matter for laughter, Naquib Khan," she rebuked. "If you will not lend me your aid then I thank you for your gracious hospitality and will depart."

"No, no; do not speak thus," he answered hastily. "I am the eager servant of a daring young woman. Would that there were more of your kind in this land." Bunching his fingers and placing them to his forehead, he bowed his head for a moment. "To-morrow I will seek a fitting moment and will mention you to him, but it is not in my mind what reply will be given." He hesitated for a moment. "If the Emperor will give audience how, then, will you approach, seeing that you cannot walk without aid? Your mother cannot go with you."

"You will lead me to the curtain and using my crutch I will go in and face him," replied the girl easily. "Seeing my condition may soften his heart towards me."

Naquib Khan made a slight grimace and Ameyra took the opportunity to plead weariness, and the party broke up soon afterwards.

CHAPTER XIII

JALAL-UD-DIN AKBAR, Emperor of India, son of Humayun and grandson of the great Baber, was walking in the pleasant garden courtyard of his private apartments in the cool of the morning. Thirty-six years old, his stocky figure, with unusually long arms and strong hands, seemed shorter than it was beside the tall figure of Father Ridolfo, to whom he was talking as they strolled between the flower-beds.

His mood had changed from that of the previous day and he had even smiled several times when the priest beside him grew vehement as he propounded some religious point. The past night had been cooler than of late, but in spite of this Akbar had been restless and could not sleep. At about midnight he had left his bed and given orders that two teams were to turn out at once, because he wished to play polo. The game was played with phosphorescent

balls under a three-quarter moon. The chukkars had been prolonged and violent, with the result that the Emperor, on his return from the ground, slept well and arose feeling his normal self. When this became known, as it did immediately, even the disgruntled players, who had been dragged from their beds, agreed the price was worth paying.

Father Ridolfo had been talking almost without a pause for several minutes when Akbar interrupted him.

"My friend, I admire your wisdom and your great learning, but it comes to my mind that you, and those of your faith, lack the great virtue of tolerance. God is God, whatever name men give to him. You say there is only one true faith and that is your own. I say that when men's hearts are sincere all creeds lead to one end. Who are such as we to say one is better than another?" His pale, slightly Mongol face changed as he grinned boyishly and poked the earnest priest in the ribs with a thumb. "Come, we do but split tiger's whiskers and on this fine day should think of lighter and more pleasurable things. What of those?" He pointed to a large flock of tame pigeons which were flying in a pale cobalt sky. "They delight me with their tumbling flight and eager love-making."

"As you wish it," replied the Jesuit sighing. "I am the King's servant in all things."

At that moment Jehangir, Akbar's eleven-year-old son by Mariam Zamani, dashed out of a doorway on the far side of the courtyard. Halting and turning the boy shouted a stream of abuse at someone still within the building. He then paused, listening.

"No, I will not!" he yelled. "Your father was a fish insect and you make my head ache with your dull readings."

Akbar smiled, remembering his own boyhood when he had refused to learn to read or to write, saying that these were bad for the mind. He called to the boy, who came reluctantly to his father.

"Why do you behave thus, my son? Have you forgotten princes do not use the language of the low bazaars? Whom do you make eat dirt and abuse?"

"It is Naquib Khan, my lord," replied Jehangir sulkily. "He wishes me to read dull books at all hours when I would be at the fort learning to be a warrior. I care not for history."

Naquib Khan, carrying a tome, hurried out into the sunlight, where he called to the prince. On seeing the Emperor he stood confused until told to approach.

"You have a rebellious and ill-mannered pupil, old man, who would be a soldier rather than a sage." Akbar turned to his son. "Go now, but for this time only. Tell my General Bairam Khan in the fort that I will speak with him in the evening."

The boy joyfully ran off and the Emperor was about to turn away when he saw that his reader was trying to say something.

"What lies in your mind, my friend?" he enquired amiably.

The old man still hesitated and Akbar smiled.

"Speak and have no fear," he said, bending down and breaking off a rose which he held to his nose. "The blackness has gone and I am a man again."

"My lord king, there lies in my house a girl who would have audience with you," announced Naquib Khan with a rush of words. "She is beautiful and of high intelligence."

"A girl! What girl?" demanded the Emperor, lowering the rose and frowning.

"She comes from Rajilal, Huzoor. As is already known to you there is bad feeling between the prince of that state and his brother-in-law the Prince of Ajanta. It is concerning this that the girl would speak with you."

Father Ridolfo, who had been listening, gave an involuntary exclamation of surprise.

"This girl and her mother are known to me. I spoke with them on my journey here," he announced, and both Akbar and the old man looked at him with astonishment.

"What do you know of the female, my friend?" enquired the Emperor, highly amused. "Yesterday you told me that women were forbidden to you and now you say you converse with those met by the wayside. What means this? It savours of some naughtiness!"

The Jesuit blushed and showed other signs of embarrassment, much to Akbar's delight. Naquib Khan, seeing his master's mood and the turn the subject of Lamia was taking, also smiled at the foreigner's discomfiture. Father Ridolfo then hastily explained the circumstances under which he had met Lamia and laid stress upon her high intellect.

"How was this strange wisdom displayed?" asked Akbar, who suspected the priest of persiflage.

"Among other things she asked two questions."

"Did you make answer?"

"No, my lord."

"What were they?"

"The first was this. What is more deadly than poison?"

"The answer?"

"The tongue, my lord king."

Akbar showed appreciation of this and then demanded the second question.

"She then wished to know that which is darker than death."

"Yes?"

"She gave no answer, but said that you should be asked and if you gave no answer she would give it when we next met."

Naquib Khan and the Jesuit exchanged glances as the Emperor moved away with his head bent in thought. They followed him as he approached a deep, arched, and colonnaded hall open on two sides, and here Akbar stopped and turned.

"Several answers come into my mind," he said slowly. "Life without love, blindness, or marriage lacking sons, but none of these is fitting." He then stared at Naquib Khan for a few moments. "I would know the answer. Go! Bring this girl to me."

The old man started in surprise and then hurried away still clutching his book. A few minutes later he burst in upon Ameyra and Lamia as they were completing their morning toilet. Ameyra, highly scandalized, was about to protest shrilly when she saw her host's excited face and paused.

"The Emperor has summoned you, my daughter," he said breathlessly to Lamia. "You must go at once. He will not be kept waiting unduly."

At this news mother and daughter gazed at each other in dismay. The announcement being unexpected, Lamia was dressed only in a simple gown of apricot silk and could hardly appear before the Emperor without a long and complicated toilet. The girl then laughed gaily.

"It is of no great account that I am not fittingly prepared. He will speak with me and I am content." She scrambled to her feet and stood leaning on a low table. "Let us go now lest he change his mind."

The old man agreed, but paused uncertainly as he put down his book.

"The distance from here is too great for you to walk quickly with my aid," he said firmly. "We must indeed hasten and you be carried. Wait! I will fetch my son, and he, being strong, will run with you in his arms."

"An excellent thought!" cried Lamia. "Go and find him!"

When Kais Khan was rushed into the women's room and told that he must pick Lamia up and carry her in his arms he stared at his father with stupefaction. A shy and priggish young man, he then protested in shocked tones.

"Idiot!" snapped his father angrily. "Do as I bid you. This is of an importance far greater than your stupid modesty."

Kais Khan was pushed roughly forward, and gurgling with mirth, Lamia allowed herself to be caught up in his arms and hugged clumsily to his chest. She then held out her crutch to Naquib Khan, who took it as she adjusted a hastily donned veil. The procession, with Ameyra keeping well to the rear, trotted off, and the strange spectacle did not pass unnoticed as they moved towards Akbar's apartments.

When the party arrived at the door leading into the courtyard, Ameyra remained behind, while the others went to the spot where the Emperor had last been standing close to the open-sided hall. Kais Khan was told to put the girl down on to her feet and he did this so quickly that she almost fell before being given her crutch. The old man now ordered his son to go away, and as he ran off his father stared about the apparently empty courtyard.

"Where is he?" enquired Lamia anxiously, as she unfastened her veil. "This place is empty."

She turned so that her back was towards the old man as she gazed about the deserted yard. At that moment, Naquib Khan caught sight of Akbar hiding behind one of the thick arches in the hall, from where he was making signs that the old man should depart at once. He obeyed instantly and retired to where Ameyra was peeping in through the doorway.

Bitterly disappointed, Lamia turned to ask for an explanation from her companion, only to find that she was alone. This became too much to be borne calmly. Suspecting a cruel jest had been played upon her she staggered across to the shallow steps leading to the hall and sat down heavily on the uppermost one. Large tears rolled down her face and she beat her hands together in distress. At that moment Akbar came out from his hiding-place and crept up to the girl.

"What are you doing in this place?" he enquired loudly. "Do you not know these are the Emperor's apartments?"

At the sound of his voice Lamia started convulsively, turned about and stared up. Never before having seen Akbar she did not recognize him.

"They told me the Emperor would give me audience and that he awaited me here," she replied dolefully. "Now I see it was but a jest."

Akbar smiled down at the girl somewhat sardonically.

"Who are you, chit, that he should give you private audience? He is no courtier seeking a pretty face. Only the loose-minded would believe such a summons."

More simply dressed than many of his courtiers, the Emperor gave no visible evidence of who he was, and Lamia naturally assumed he was an official. Scrambling to her feet and leaning on her crutch he faced him indignantly.

"Who are you, fool, to pounce out and question me thus?" she cried. "I see the lord king on matters beyond your understanding. Go, seek him and tell him I am here!"

Akbar had never been spoken to in this manner and he gasped, and then laughed heartily as he banged his thighs with both hands in his merriment. This was too much for Lamia, who leaned forward and promptly slapped his face with a stinging blow.

"Son of a Sweeper!" she hissed. "You would mock me in my distress. When I see the Emperor I will make loud complaint and have you beaten for this insolence."

Ameyra and Naquib Khan, who had watched the scene with growing consternation, now reacted sharply. The woman screamed and fled, and the old man galvanised into action raced forward, dashed up the steps and caught Lamia fiercely by the arm.

"O Miserable Girl, it is the Emperor himself whom you have struck!" he shouted. "All is now lost!"

The significance of his words took a long moment to sink into her mind and she turned her head and gazed at Akbar, who had stepped back a pace and was fingering his smarting cheek. Dazed as she was by this disaster, the girl's unusual strength of character came to her aid; despair also gave her courage. She lifted her chin proudly and tears welled up in her eyes again.

"My lord king, I am the dust beneath your feet," she said slowly. "Mine is a deadly offence, but the fault lies with you. Kings who masquerade as common men court treatment as such."

The horrified Naquib Khan now attempted to drag the girl away, but Akbar waved a hand.

"By my father's head you are brave, child!" he cried, with sincere admiration in his voice. "Above all I love courage. The fault was indeed mine. To play hide-and-seek with those unknown to you is not wise. Am I forgiven?" He smiled a little aslant.

In answer, Lamia clumsily got down on to her knees, and, thrusting aside her crutch, she bowed her head to the marble pavement and with fluttering hands patted the Emperor's slippers. Akbar watched in silence and then signalled to the old man to raise the girl up.

A few minutes later, Lamia was seated on some cushions on a bench at the rear of the hall and beside her Akbar leaned back, and with rare understanding, waited for her to regain some of her composure. Standing nearby were Father Ridolfo and Naquib Khan. The Jesuit, who had watched the scene, was vastly intrigued, while the old man was still too shaken to think coherently. The Emperor turned and looked up at Father Ridolfo.

"Is this the girl?" he asked.

"Yes, my lord king, it is she."

"Good! I will ask her the answer." Akbar leaned towards Lamia. "This man, who stands beside me, tells how you spoke with him, asking two questions to which he made no answer. The first I already know. What of the second? What is darker than death?"

"My lord, it is a blindness of the soul," replied Lamia quickly, having partly recovered from her shock.

"By Allah, that is the truth! From such a state do most men suffer," cried her companion, amazed. "Such wisdom coming from you is like speech from a new-born babe. Are such thoughts as these born in your mind?"

"No, my lord king! I have a little learning and consider such sayings worthy of remembrance."

"From whence did they come?"

"It is said, my lord, that a great queen asked them of a great king."

Akbar nodded gravely and then changed the subject.

"How are you named, O Wise One?"

"Lamia, my lord king."

"What does it signify?"

"One who walks skilfully."

"Ah ho, then you belie it!" He pointed to her crutch and smiled.

"As my lord the king says," she replied. "I fell from a rope and a bone was broken."

"What befell?"

"Therein lies the reason why I journeyed here from Rajilal to speak with you, my lord king. The Prince of Rajilal has quarrelled with his brother-in-law and war is to be declared between the states."

"This is already known to me and I make inquiry into the matter. He, of Ajanta, is already at my court and the Prince of Rajilal has been summoned. Were you the cause of this brawling?"

Lamia hesitated and then nodded.

"Yes, my lord king, but I come praying you to order them to make their peace. Such behaviour is lacking in princely dignity and I am not worthy."

The Emperor laughed heartily once again and laid a hand on the girl's arm.

"You have caused me more mirth than I have enjoyed for many days, young woman. Have you told this naughty prince to behave himself?"

"My lord king, I sought to reason with him, but he spurned me and I left him."

"Oh oh, so a lover's quarrel is also concerned in the matter?"

"My lord, it is rather a matter of vanity and wounded pride."

Akbar nodded, and after a long pause he suddenly got to his feet.

"I have made a plan! When these princes stand before me, as they will soon do, you shall listen unseen by them. When I call you out you shall face them and together we will settle this matter." He then turned to Naquib Khan. "Has it become known that this girl lodges with you?"

"No, my lord king! She did but arrive last night."

"Good! See to it your household still their tongues and her presence remains secret."

When Lamia returned, she found her mother had packed and was preparing to depart in haste. From what she had seen in the doorway, Ameyra imagined that only the Maharajah might save Lamia from the consequences of her action. When the girl came into the room showing signs of cheerfulness, her mother could not believe what she saw and dropped the garment she was holding.

"O Best of Mothers, he is pleased and has shown some regard for me," announced the girl gaily as she sat down. "I am the happiest of women."

Ameyra at once glanced across at Naquib Khan, who was standing near the door, and he nodded and made a comical grimace as

Lamia is lodging here in the palace at this time, my sister," continued Hamida, whose sharp eyes had not missed her visitor's astonishment.

"Here! In the palace?" cried the Ranee, deeply shocked. "Surely you jest, O Illustrious One?"

Hamida shook her head and smiled, showing a remarkably bad set of remaining teeth.

"I do not jest, but wish to meet this girl, who has in her the makings of greatness. She abused my son, slapped his face, and he laughed at her, treating her rather as a man than a woman."

The Empress enjoyed the effect this pronouncement had on her visitor, who was so startled that her ever-ready tongue was temporarily stilled.

"She is a daughter of a devil!" gasped the old lady at last. "Never before have I heard of such shamelessness. Evil was the day that my son first looked upon her face."

Hamida chuckled and then demanded to be told everything connected with Lamia. The Ranee willingly obeyed, and during the telling she called Ameyra several extremely indelicate names which highly amused her listener. When, however, it came to explaining what had occurred at Rajigarh during the old lady's absence, she gave a distorted picture based on exaggerated reports which had reached her.

"Has this girl unusual beauty as well as intelligence?" enquired Hamida, when the visitor ended her narrative somewhat lamely.

"Yes, she is fair enough," replied the Ranee reluctantly.

"She is modest, and sweet-natured, and loves your son?"

The old lady nodded, and the Empress shrugged her shoulders.

"Good! Then why should we old women keep them apart? Doubtless this girl will bear your son brats that will thrive, which is more than his wife could do, if all I hear is true."

The Ranee made some attempt to defend her daughter-in-law, of whom she was fond.

"I sometimes think the fault was not hers alone," she said quickly. "Many pipes soon empty a fishpond, and so it was with my son."

"True, true," answered Hamida with mock solemnity, "but I see it not so in this case. What of the ram and his many wives?"

At this point one of the court ladies giggled and was frozen by a glare from the Ranee, who saw nothing amusing in this discussion.

"In whose house does this girl lodge, O Queen?"

"In the apartments of one, Naquib Khan, who is a sage and a most honourable man. But this knowledge must remain unspoken of, because my son has given an order that her presence shall remain a secret."

The Ranee Jadonji looked dismayed at this news, because it had been her intention to go and find out from Lamia exactly what had taken place during her absence. Guessing this, Hamida went on

to explain how the two princes were to face the Emperor after a public audience on the following day.

"It may be I can arrange that we listen unseen and so fully judge the merits of the case."

"Indeed, O Queen, my heart would be gladdened if it were so."

Hamida now changed the conversation and soon the two old ladies turned to gossip and other topics dear to their hearts.

The great courtyard of Public Audience, vast and bare as that of a mosque, was more than usually crowded at nine o'clock in the morning. This was because an audience had not been held for some time and there were now many who came with petitions.

The open-fronted hall with its gleaming marble, inlaid pillars, and golden roof, faced the courtyard, and above the few shallow steps leading to it, and in the central arch, was the throne. This was an elaborate chair, wide and deep, and with short legs. It was made of teak and covered with sheets of embossed silver.

In a great semi-circle, twenty yards from the steps, a squatting multitude watched Akbar appear from the rear of the hall and take his seat on the throne. As he did so, the courtiers, politicians, administrators, and senior officials, shuffled into their positions.

The Emperor was simply dressed in a long, white coat with jodhpurs showing beneath, and about his waist was a gold belt from which hung a short, jewelled, ceremonial sword. In his flat, tightly wound green pugri there blazed a great sapphire, set in an aigrette of diamonds.

The first part of the audience was taken up with receiving the personal reports from provincial administrators, distant garrison commanders, and the submission of nobility not important enough to be given private audience. Then came the second half of the proceedings where the general populace could approach with complaints or petitions, and also justice was administered in more important cases.

The first criminals to appear were the seven men who had accompanied Adham Khan when he had entered the palace and murdered the Imperial Diwan. They faced the throne, ten yards distant from it, and were closely guarded.

The Emperor stared at each sullen face while the charges against the men were read out in a loud voice by an official. The multitude listened in awed silence, but its movements combined to make a rustling like wind in trees. The official broke off and Akbar turned to his General, Bairam Khan, who was standing nearby.

"Who are these men?"

"My lord king, they come from the North," replied the old man bowing his head. "They are Sher Shah's men, who would have murdered you even as Sher Shah would have done your illustrious father had he caught him."

The Emperor nodded and turned to the prisoners.

"Fools and jackals that you are," he said loudly. "Adham Khan, now dead by my own hands, sought to sit in my place and you, hoping for favour, would have aided his ambition. Those who climb tall ladders should first see that they are firm and in place." He turned to the General again. "Have them taken and chained before the Agra Gate. For nine moons shall they remain so as a warning to all men and an example of the king's mercy. I do not slay wolves. The earth is too sweet to foul with their blood."

Those who heard this verdict gasped and a great murmuring arose, because it had been fully expected the accused would be crucified, or given some other form of unpleasant death. It was, of course, known that the ruler's black mood had passed, but this clemency was beyond any expectation.

The prisoners, equally bewildered, were led away, and there followed the usual stream of domestic problems, including divorce cases, disputes, land petitions, and, lastly but by no means least, petitions arising out of the new city where merchants and traders requiring space for their warehouses had been refused by the officials concerned.

Without warning, and in the middle of a case, Akbar declared the audience at an end and, getting to his feet, went to the rear of the hall. He had suddenly remembered it was this morning that he was to deal with the two princelings. When this had been settled he decided he would have completed a full morning's work.

Half an hour later, having drunk some sherbet and eaten a few apricots, because Akbar neither drank wine, nor smoked tobacco, he went to a small room used only to receive very distinguished guests. This was a square, inner apartment with an open front which looked out on to a long marble gallery down whose middle ran a series of shallow ponds into which small fountains tinkled pleasantly. Beyond this was the garden courtyard where the Emperor had talked with the Jesuit and first met Lamia. The floor of the room was covered by a large Persian carpet, and facing each other, with their backs to the side walls, were two low, wide couches piled high with cushions. Let into the rear wall was a doorway concealed by a long damask curtain so that anyone unacquainted with the room would fail to suspect its presence.

Sitting cross-legged and side by side on the right-hand couch were the Maharajah and his brother-in-law. They sat with their backs half-turned from each other and in glum silence, but when Akbar appeared they scrambled to their feet and greeted him formally.

"Be seated," said the Emperor, waving a hand as he moved towards the other couch. "It was unwise to leave two such ravening tigers alone in my palace, but I see no harm has been done."

He sat down, and leaning back among the cushions, stared at the princes, who were acutely aware of his regard. Rao Chandra's

fat face was sullen, but the Maharajah grinned faintly as he caught his Emperor's eye.

"It saddens me that I dragged you from your so Heavenlike state of Rajilal, my friend. I assure you the need was great."

"It is nothing, my lord," replied the Maharajah gravely. "I am more than compensated by the sight of your godlike face, and I bask in the sunlight of your presence."

"That was well answered," Akbar smiled. "You always had a pretty turn of speech. I would that others owned your manners." He glanced at Rao Chandra. "You, my friend, I summoned to discuss other matters already known to you, but first I will deal with this unprincely brawling. It has come to my ears that you would declare war upon your brother-in-law of Rajilal. My empire is still too troubled for me to endure strife among my princes. Doubtless, you both remember my grandfather, Baber, had a way of dealing with quarrelsome princelings. To keep an open mind I have not made inquiry into the cause of the quarrel, but if it is not an excellent one, by my father's head, I will make you both stand before my people in this city, whose laughter shall make your vanity wriggle in the dust like a half-dead snake. The report says that you of Ajanta first flung down the challenge. Is this so?"

"Yes, my lord. I have suffered many and shameful things at his hands," replied Rao Chandra gloomily. "My face is blackened and my honour gone. The very hills mock me and in the bazaars men bandy my name."

The Emperor nodded, leaned back among the cushions, and closed his eyes. He had heard these words so often before and they wearied him.

"Without windy talk, tell me what befell?"

"You, my lord, summoned me, and because my state is far distant, and the journey fatiguing, I stayed to refresh myself in Rajilal, where my virtuous sister is queen. There in durbar, he who sits beside me, grew drunk, and before all men declared me a boaster and a liar. My lord, I am no coward to sit, and smile, and——"

"Yes, yes; we know!" exclaimed Akbar, opening his eyes for a moment. "You are as courageous as a furious tiger. Continue. What matter concerned the boasting and lies?"

"At my brother-in-law's court there is a girl who is very fair. She sat unveiled at that time and he claimed she was the greatest in the land in the art of walking upon the rope. He then became greatly enraged when softly I said that a man in my state was the greatest. It was then he wagered that the girl would cross the waters of his lake upon a rope. To this I agreed, and he departed in furious heat leaving me alone. I was a guest in his palace and he treated me without honour."

"What was wagered?" demanded Akbar, sitting upright and opening his eyes.

Rao Chandra hesitated and glanced about the room before replying, and when he did so he avoided the Emperor's eyes.

"If she failed she would lie with me, my lord."

"Is this true?" Akbar glanced at the Maharajah, who nodded.

"If the wager were won, what then?"

"I demanded nothing of him but to prove him a liar, my lord," replied the Maharajah quickly.

"Demanded nothing?" cried Akbar astonished.

"He said he would make the girl a queen!" exclaimed Rao Chandra sullenly.

"What is this girl to you that you would wager her virtue in this manner?" asked the Emperor, compressing his lips.

The Maharajah sat and said nothing, and looked not unlike a small boy caught red-handed at some devilry.

"Answer me! What is this girl to you?"

"She is all the world to me, my lord. I knew she would not fail," replied the Maharajah simply.

"Had she done so, what then?"

"That was not considered, my lord."

"This drunken folly took place in durbar so that all could hear. I am astounded you should be so lacking in princely dignity and it savours of the bazaars rather than a palace." Akbar frowned and rubbed his chin. "What then befell?"

"My lord, the girl walked upon a rope across the water," said Rao Chandra quickly, "but towards the end the rope became slack and she fell. He then shamefully drove me from the palace in the night."

The Emperor glanced at the Maharajah.

"It is indeed true that I behaved with great foolishness in durbar, being heated with wine, but the great fault lay in the breaking of the bamboo pole, which had been cut," said the Maharajah, who went on to tell what had occurred after Lamia had fallen. Rao Chandra attempted to interrupt several times, but Akbar stopped him sharply.

"What proof have you that your brother-in-law did this thing?" asked the Emperor impatiently.

"He spoke alone with my Diwan."

"That is no proof, as any child would know. What of your Diwan?"

"He cools his head in a dungeon, my lord."

"You have heard what has been said, Rao Chandra. What reply do you make?"

The man, encouraged by the remarks about the lack of proof, spoke at once.

"He has twisted the truth to ensnare me. It is true that I spoke with the Diwan, but I know nothing of what lay in his mind concerning the cutting of the pole."

There followed a long pause while Akbar made up his mind,

and the princes watched and wondered what he was thinking. He spoke again.

"You, Rao Chandra, know that I have no love for you. Because I value justice above all things I will not myself give the verdict. Another shall do it for me."

Getting to his feet the Emperor went to the damask curtain, and holding it aside, Lamia stepped into the room. Moving across towards Akbar's couch she smiled at her dumbfounded lover. He had got to his feet and was staring at her as if unable to believe what he saw.

"Lamia, you are here!" he cried, moving towards her. "What means this? It was in my mind that you had returned to Ombra."

Before Lamia could reply, the Emperor dropped the curtain and waved the Maharajah away, telling him to sit down again.

"Yes, my friend, it is the girl," he said grimly, as he started to pace up and down the room. "She came bravely to me begging that I stopped this unseemly brawling, and added that you might be taught wisdom. She has more brains and breeding than both of you together. You are a drunken fool!" He stopped and waved a finger at the Maharajah. "Concerning you, Rao Chandra, it is sure that you made the wager that she lay with you."

"No, my lord, I did not do this thing!"

Both Lamia and the Maharajah protested, and Akbar turned to the girl.

"You were present. Which of these princes made the condition?"

"He of Ajanta, my lord king," replied the girl instantly. "I saw in his eyes the light of foul desire."

"This I believe!" exclaimed Akbar with disgust. "This prince's throne sways more dangerously than before." He looked at Lamia. "You, O Wise One, have heard all that has been said. Was it the truth, or did they weave lies to cloud my judgment?"

"The truth, as far as it is known to me, has been spoken. Concerning the cutting of the pole I know nothing other than that told me by my lord of Rajilal."

The Emperor stopped his pacing and placing an arm about Lamia's shoulders, he smiled down at her.

"I can see in your eyes that your soul is free and unsullied, O Rose of Hindustan!" He glanced across at Rao Chandra for an instant. "In some men's minds there is so much corruption that they breed evil things even as maggots wriggle in carrion. What think you? Would you have me force this Prince of Rajilal to drink less wine and to learn wisdom as a boy is beaten to remember his manners?"

"No, no, my lord king, leave this in my hands!" cried the girl, smiling up at him. "He is all my life to me and I would not have our love blemished by this foolishness. No great harm has been done, but what is personal honour when the lives of men are to be wasted to reburnish it? Tell them, my lord king, to put the past

away so that all may be as before. War cannot undo what is done, nor can it wipe away remembrance. The truly great are above dishonour: it is the weak who snarl and yap at fancied insults."

"Well said and bravely spoken!" cried Akbar cheerfully, as he took his arm from the girl's shoulders.

He moved away and looking up, Lamia saw a strange new light in her lover's eyes. She guessed instantly from it that he had become jealous. She smiled at him sweetly and decided to encourage this stimulating emotion.

Akbar stuck his thumbs into his belt, and with legs well apart, he looked sternly at the princes as they stood before him; Rao Chandra also having got to his feet.

"Whether you plotted the cutting of this pole, Rao Chandra, matters nothing to me. You have got much that was deserved for lusting after what was not your own. It becomes clear to me that it mattered little to you if the girl, or your own man, were the most skilful on the rope, but you used it to gain your own desires." He turned to the Maharajah. "You have behaved like a child who has been given a jewel whose worth it does not understand. You wickedly wagered this girl's virtue, causing her grievous harm. I say you are not worthy of her and to teach you wisdom in the matter she shall remain at our court for six moons."

Lamia gave a cry of distress at this verdict, and the Maharajah's face became momentarily distorted with rage, but Rao Chandra smiled at his brother-in-law's discomforture.

The Maharajah started to protest, but the Emperor frowned and stopped him as he drew the sword at his side from its sheath. He held it out towards the princes.

"As the girl has said there shall be peace between you."

Both men placed the tips of the fingers of the right hand on the blade.

"It is peace," said the Maharajah frowning.

"It is peace between us," said Rao Chandra, who knew that, in view of what was to come regarding other matters, he would be wise to do as the Emperor wished.

"Good! Very good!" said Akbar replacing the sword. "It is finished."

This conclusion was thoroughly unsatisfactory from everyone's point of view, except that of the Emperor; but at that moment there came a dramatic interruption.

A few feet above the concealed doorway was a round hole ten inches in diameter filled with a pierced marble screen, and behind it was a tiny gallery. Besides acting as a ventilator, the hole enabled a listener to hear all that took place in the room below. Thin brown fingers suddenly wrenched the screen from its place and through the hole came the sari-covered head of the Raneé Jadonji, resembling a turtle darting its head from beneath its shell.

"My lord, it is indeed not finished!" she cried, shrilly.

Everyone started convulsively and then looked up.

"Who is that?" demanded Akbar angrily after a pause.

"You ask who I am," she replied, wagging her head to and fro in a ridiculous manner. "I am that besotted fool's mother, the Ranee Jadonji."

"Whose mother, O Bodiless One; both are besotted?" enquired the Emperor, whose sense of humour was overcoming his annoyance.

"He of Rajilal, my lord. The gods save us that I should ever have borne that foul ruffian who stands beside him. He is detested and forsaken of all worth. A violator of the more common decencies, an odious and revolting excrescence."

"Enough, enough!" answered Akbar chuckling. "You cried out that all was not finished. Tell us the reason."

"My lord, only a part has been told to you. The son of shame has cunningly hidden his most vile action," answered the old lady furiously. "When I was in Benares——"

"Wait! I cannot speak with you thus, O Great Queen. It is unseemly. Never before has a head alone addressed me. Come down and stand before us and we will listen."

The Ranee's head promptly vanished and the Emperor turned to her son.

"What does this mean? Have all your zenana come to visit us?"

The Maharajah shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"When last I heard of my illustrious mother she was at the Queens' Praying in Benares, together with my wife." His voice then became almost pleading. "She is strong-willed and with a sharp tongue, my lord. Do not pay undue regard to her words if they seem lacking in respect."

Akbar nodded understandingly, and the party waited in silence for the old lady's appearance.

The Maharajah was worried by his mother's unfortunate appearance. He had made no reference to the fact that he knew Rao Chandra had kidnapped his wife in Benares because he had decided to divorce her, and her brother's action had simplified matters. If Akbar now learned what had happened he might order her to be returned to him which would force his hand.

He was still undecided as to what line to take when the Empress, closely followed by the Ranee, came into the room. It being the first time that day Akbar had seen his mother he embraced her warmly and held her at arm's length.

"You grow younger and more beautiful each day," he said gravely. "Soon you will be wearing the veil again."

The old lady beamed with pleasure and clicked her tongue.

"You flatter as easily as your father did, my son, and it is still sweet in my ears." She turned and stared at Lamia, who bowed deeply. "You are the Lady Lamia, of whom I have heard much. They have not lied. You are indeed fair, but something of a chit

it would seem. It has come to my knowledge that you smacked my son's face and made him eat dirt and abuse." Hamida nodded and chuckled. "Doubtless it was well deserved."

Lamia smiled politely, while Akbar sighed heavily and shook his head.

"Allah protect us from all women; nothing can be kept from them. I belch in my secret chamber and instantly the harem knows it and declares I have a belly ache." He beckoned the Ranee forward. "Now, O Mother of a Naughty Son, tell us why you stuck your head out of that hole. It is in my mind that you and my Imperial mother have been clucking like two hens?"

The Ranee was too agitated to greet the Emperor with the customary ceremony and began her story at once.

"There have been scandalous doings, my lord. Villainy most foul. All Benares knew and babbled of this thing until my honour was entirely covered with the dust of their idle talk. My daughter-in-law was on her way to Mipali Kharpa alone in her litter so that she might pray to the gods for strong sons, when men, sent by him, pounced upon her in the public street and bore her away. She is a queen, my lord, and it is infamous that such things should be in the land. In my youth this ravisher would have been trampled to death under the elephant, as he well deserves to be." The old lady swung round and glared at Rao Chandra, who made an ugly grimace at her in return.

The Emperor's face had grown dark with anger.

"Why did you do this shameful thing?" he asked Rao Chandra.

The man, with lowered eyes and a sullen expression, did not reply.

"Answer me!" repeated Akbar menacingly.

There being still no reply, Akbar lost his temper. Stepping forward he raised a clenched fist and hit the prince a crashing blow on the chin causing him to stagger backwards and collapse on to the couch, where he lay breathing heavily.

Akbar now faced the Maharajah, who stepped back hastily out of reach from his fist.

"Did you know of this thing?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Why, then, was I not told of it?"

The Maharajah hesitated for so long that Akbar let out two violent oaths.

"Have you all become stricken dumb?" he roared. "Answer me, I say."

"I did not speak of it fearing you would order her return, my lord," replied the Maharajah hastily.

This admission was too much for the Emperor to accept calmly, and he swore, and cursed, and ended up by calling the Maharajah several kinds of fool, until Hamida took charge of a situation which was rapidly getting out of hand.

"Be calm, my son," she said, laying a restraining hand on his arm. "You have lost your swift wit in a mire of anger. It is clear why he held his tongue."

His mother was one of the only persons who could calm Akbar in moments of rage and her words had an immediate effect. His face cleared and, folding his arms, he faced her.

"Why should I be troubled with these men's domestic brawls?" he asked. "I summoned them to call off war and strife, and not to deal with wife-stealing. Tell me what lay in the fool's mind."

"It is simple. He desires to be rid of his wife so that he can make this girl his queen. He of Ajanta has given him ample cause."

Akbar nodded and looked across at Lamia, who had gone to her lover's side and was watching the scene with wide, interested eyes. Kings in a rage were not so awe-inspiring as she had been led to believe. Her memory had flashed back to Ombra, where she had seen a grain merchant behave in a similar manner when a camel drover had allowed his beast to back itself into the open-fronted shop; even the bad language had been the same. Akbar continued to stare at her reflectively for some moments before turning his gaze to her lover.

"Is it as my mother, the Empress, says?"

"Yes, my lord," admitted the Maharajah grinning.

The Emperor now addressed Lamia.

"What have you to say regarding this thing?"

"I have no desire to be a queen, my lord king," replied the girl instantly. "The Maharanee was kind, and sweet-natured, and I would not cause her shame or pain. She is entirely without fault in this matter and it would be dishonourable that she should suffer."

"She speaks the whole truth, my lord!" cried the Ranee, slapping her breasts. "There has been shame enough without adding divorce to our scandals. My daughter-in-law is a good and virtuous wife."

Akbar smiled faintly as he turned to Rao Chandra, who was now sitting upright as he nursed his chin.

"By the Prophet, the ways of Allah are strange! If this wife be as you say how could one mother have borne two such different children?" Akbar waved a hand. "It is finished! I will not further concern myself, but command that all further unseemly conduct shall cease. You may depart."

Acting upon a sudden impulse, Lamia moved forward and dared to lay a hand on his arm.

"My lord king, what of the six moons I must remain here?" she enquired pleadingly. "I pray that you reconsider."

"No, it must stand and he learn wisdom."

"It is said that you play the game of chess, my lord king."

"Yes, but how does it concern this thing?"

The girl smiled and then laughed gaily.

"I would test my wits against yours, my lord king. I will play you six games and for each I win you will remit one moon."

"By my father's head, child, the thought is a diverting one." Akbar laughed and patted her hand. "So be it. But what if I win?"

"The command stands, my lord king, and I shall wilt like an unwatered rose."

CHAPTER XIV

WITH Lamia leaning on his arm, Akbar, followed by the Empress and the Ranee, went out into the gallery, turned right and disappeared; while the Maharajah watched them with jealous anger that wrestled with bouts of self pity. What if the Emperor had taken more than a passing interest in Lamia; the mere thought caused prickling sensations to run up and down his spine. He must find out where the girl was living and talk to her alone. Leaving Rao Chandra still sitting on the couch, he went out of the room, crossed the gallery and made his way to an exit on the far side of the courtyard.

It was not without a great deal of questioning and annoyance on his part that he found out where Lamia was staying. Naquib Khan received him politely, but with faintly concealed amusement.

"The Lady Lamia lodges in your house," stated the Maharajah abruptly. "I must speak with her."

"My lord, it was so until this morning. Now she has removed to the Imperial harem," replied the old man, smiling as he saw the look of consternation on his visitor's face. "There will be no harm," he continued hastily. "He does not care greatly for women and will not drink from another's wine cup. The girl's mother is still here. Will you have me summon her?"

"Yes, bring her to me."

When Ameyra swept into the room she was prepared for the prince to be disagreeable.

"Greetings, my lord," she said bowing, but fully aware that she could now deal with him on a higher social place. "You seek my daughter?"

"Yes, woman! I would know why you permitted her to leave your side and go to the Imperial harem?"

"Who am I, my lord, when the Emperor commands?" she replied easily. "She did not return here, but sent word concerning the matter."

Ameyra's self-assurance increased the Maharajah's anger.

"Ah hi, in this I see your hand!" he cried, pacing up and down the room. "I am no fool and know of your high ambition. You lured your daughter to Agra for this very purpose."

The injustice of this accusation stung Ameyra, whose temper flared up.

"You speak without knowledge or consideration, my lord," she said sharply. "My daughter came here of her own desire. Had you listened to her words, wise beyond her age, this would not have befallen. You speak as if we were responsible for this necessity."

"Peace, woman!" shouted the Maharajah, his face distorted. "You may speak the truth, but she remains here for six moons and lost to me as if dead."

"Bapri Bap!" cried Ameyra, to whom the news was a shock. "On whose command? The Emperor's?"

"Who else, woman?"

Ameyra had been waiting with great impatience to know what had taken place between Akbar and the princes and she was unable to subdue her curiosity.

"Tell me what was said before the Emperor, my lord," she suggested. "After consideration we may then form some plan."

Naquib Khan, who had been an anxious witness of the scene, now added his persuasion to the woman's.

The Maharajah stopped his pacing, and after giving a brief account of what had occurred, his anger spent itself. When he reached Lamia's bargain with Akbar, Ameyra clapped her hands and laughed.

"How clever she is! My daughter will win and all will be well!" she cried. "Had she been a man she would have carved an empire for herself."

The Maharajah now turned so suddenly upon Naquib Khan that he jumped.

"Is he skilled at the game?" he barked.

"He wins more often by design than by skill, my lord," answered the old man. "When I play with him I judge his mood. He does many things, and most more skilfully than common men."

The Maharajah nodded, feeling less anxious because he knew Lamia was a clever and thoughtful player. He then closely questioned Ameyra about the journey to Agra, and also learned what had taken place between Lamia and Akbar at their first meeting. This made him smile and he eventually left the house feeling a good deal better than when he had arrived.

On reaching his own quarters he found a message from his mother saying she wished to see him at once. This depressed him again, because he knew that he would have to face a thoroughly indignant old lady who would not spare him. One thing, however, he was determined upon: he would under no circumstances take his wife back. The subsequent interview between mother and son was painful to a degree. The Ranee began by saying exactly what she thought of her son's general conduct and fifteen minutes later ended by telling him that he must send at once for his wife. This

caused the Maharajah to speak disrespectfully, in fact he abused her roundly for being an interfering old woman whose place was in the zenana and not rushing to and fro across the land. They parted angrily.

For three days nothing of importance happened. Lamia, in the harem, made friends with Akbar's wife, Miriam, and enjoyed long spells of conversation with Hamida. She also met Jehangir, but the spoiled, self-willed boy did not appeal to her. The Maharajah, unwilling to return to his state until he knew the outcome of the chess contest, passed the time sightseeing in the new city and playing a good deal of polo.

Akbar, absorbed in state business, completely forgot Lamia's existence, and as he rarely visited the harem, except to see his mother, he did not meet her. One evening, however, he came face to face with the Maharajah, who was returning from a bathing party on the shores of the lake.

"Ah ho, you are still here, my princeling!" he observed amiably. He then remembered Lamia and laughed. "I have your bird locked up in my harem. Has she already become more desirable in your eyes?"

"I am as thirsty earth awaiting the rains, my lord."

"Good! We princes are as other men and know that to be denied increases our desire." The Emperor nodded as an idea occurred to him. "Concerning the chess game with this girl. It shall be to-night and there shall be a private darbar. It is a diverting thought, but see to it, my lord of Rajilal, that you do not in your anxiety drink too deeply; I would not have you wagering my virtue."

At nine o'clock that evening a small and distinguished party gathered in the Moti Mahal, a place used only for entertaining exalted guests. It was a small, single building of white marble set at one end of a courtyard. The four walls consisted of arches, each filled with screens of pierced marble and shaded by deep verandah roofs.

Normally bare, the interior was now hung with dazzling brocades and on the floor were numerous silken carpets. In the middle of the single chamber and under a large chandelier was a low table on which was a chess-board set with its men. Two piles of cushions awaited the players, while forming an arena were deep couches in the form of a square. The air was heavy with perfume and from thin sticks of sandalwood whiffs of rich blue smoke drifted up to the gilded roof. On tables near the couches were shallow bowls of fruit, nuts, and sweets, and also flagons of wine.

On the couch facing the single entrance were the veiled ladies of the harem, including the Empress Miriam, Hamida, the Ranee Jadonji, and the young prince, Jehangir, who had protested at being made to attend what he called a stupid darbar. On the right were the more personal of Akbar's ministers, but only those known to be interested in the game had been invited. On the left were the

Emperor's friends, irrespective of rank, and among them were his barber, a master of horse, several pages, Naquib Khan, and Father Ridolfo, who was due to leave the court on the following day.

The atmosphere of the gathering was informal. The women ate many sweets and nuts, while the men helped themselves to wine from the flagons which were constantly replaced by watchful servants. The Emperor was well known for doing unconventional and thoroughly surprising things, but that he should engage in a chess contest with an unknown young woman had raised the liveliest interest in the court. One young Persian girl, who was firmly convinced that she had caught Akbar's interest, became hysterical when she heard the news.

The minutes passed pleasantly enough and then through the doorway came Lamia alone. Conversation died away abruptly and every head was turned in her direction. She was wearing her magnificent dress of kingfisher feathers which glowed strangely in the soft light. Unveiled, she wore a cream-coloured sari but no jewellery. Before taking her place the girl bowed deeply, first to the Empress and then to Hamida. Carefully arranging her dress she sat down on the cushions and as she did so she smiled across at Jehangir, who scowled at her in return. He then looked up at his mother.

"Why does my father play the chess game with this girl, who looks like a bird?" he demanded shrilly. "Is she——?"

"Be quiet, my son," ordered his mother hastily, while the gathering smiled and Lamia flushed.

The boy persisted that he should be answered, but his grandmother, Hamida, suddenly leaned across and slapped him heartily on the back of the neck with a bejewelled hand. This produced a roar of lamentation which died away as Akbar was seen approaching. With him was the Maharajah, whose hand he was holding. They had dined together and discussed their favourite pastimes, which included gardening, art, and music, but recent events had been carefully avoided. On nearing the Moti Mahal, Akbar turned to his companion and asked how well Lamia played chess. The Maharajah smiled and replied that she could beat him whenever she choose to do so.

"It is strange that so young a woman should play this game which is rightly a man's," observed the Emperor thoughtfully. "None in my harem play it, except my mother, who learned it in her youth in the camps beside the fires."

On entering the hall, Akbar indicated that his companion should sit alone on the vacant couch while he himself passed on. Pausing before the women he patted his mother's hand, tweaked his wife's ear, and laid a hand on his son's head.

"What ails you, my son?" he asked, looking down. "Did I not hear you roaring like a young tiger?"

The boy wriggled away from under the hand and sat back with

a sulky look on his face. He then pointed at his grandmother.

"She beat me," he replied spitefully.

"It was well deserved," said Hamida quickly. "The brat utterly lacks all manners and self-control, and will doubtless come to a bad end."

"Never, never!" cried the boy. "I hate you!"

The Emperor smiled tolerantly and turning away sat down on the pile of cushions facing Lamia, who looked up and smiled shyly at him.

"You are prepared to give me battle," he enquired, eyeing her dress with obvious admiration.

"Yes, my lord king, I am ready. There shall be no quarter?"

"Good! There shall be no quarter given or accepted."

Akbar then became fully aware of the chess-board with its pieces and he stared down at it in surprise. The large board was made of white jade and shining black onyx squares edged with a band of red gold. The men were of ivory, with one set dyed a rich crimson. Each piece was a treasure in itself being richly carved and studded with diamonds and rubies.

"From where did this come?" he demanded, looking up.

"I have never before seen it."

"It lay in your treasury, my son," answered his mother, leaning forward. "When the contest was first spoken of I remembered. It was given to your grandfather by Suleiman and was brought down from Kabul with the other treasure when your father again took the throne at Delhi."

"A pretty thought, O Best of Mothers!" exclaimed Akbar turning and smiling his thanks at the old lady. "It is indeed worthy of the occasion."

There were many soft expressions of agreement from the guests as Akbar turned and picked up a white and a red pawn which he held behind his back before thrusting his closed hands towards Lamia. She indicated his left hand which held the white pawn and her right to make the first move in the game.

As the white pieces already faced her she at once opened with the king's pawn and a hush settled down on the gathering who leaned forward to watch. Akbar followed suit and the girl proceeded to bring out her queen and bishop into the position for the Fool's Mate. The Emperor, of course, knew of this, but no one had yet dared to try it on him. Other pieces were then brought into play, but Akbar failed to pay any special attention to the fact that Lamia had brought her king's knight into action on the right of the board. After prolonged and assumed concentration she moved this knight into a square where it acted as a bait to the pawn used by her opponent to counter the Fool's Mate. Akbar swallowed the bait and took the knight with the pawn, thereby exposing himself. In a flash, Lamia's queen had swept down the board and the game was at an end.

The girl sat back with demurely lowered eyelids, while her opponent stared at the board in some bewilderment. The guests held their breath and waited to see what his reaction to this disaster would be. Naquib Khan, however, so far forgot himself as to cry out 'Well done!' This caused a shudder, it being a grave breach of etiquette amounting almost to high treason. The Emperor turned his head sharply and stared at the old man for an instant. He then laughed and banged his hands together.

"Indeed it was well done!" he cried. "But I will not be so caught again."

Everyone now relaxed and faces broke into smiles as the pieces were set for a fresh game. The second game was a long one with both players losing many men. Eventually, Lamia was left with only her king, two pawns and a knight, while her opponent had a king, castle, bishop, and one pawn.

"You will give me this game?" suggested the Emperor suddenly.

"No, my lord king. My king still lives."

Akbar shrugged his shoulders and the game continued. It ended with Lamia skilfully forcing a stalemate. Akbar frowned but said nothing and the third game was begun. This was shorter and won by the girl, who became aware that her opponent was either bored or tired—or both. She won the fourth game even more easily. The Emperor smiled, sat back, and shook his head.

"It is finished," he said, leaning across and picking up a small cluster of huge white grapes. "You are permitted to leave for Rajilal when you wish."

"I have only won three games, my lord king. What of the remainder?" enquired Lamia, who had been enjoying herself and lost to everything but the game.

"I give them to you. You are my master in this."

Lamia looked crestfallen for a moment and then had an idea.

"My lord king, I will play you the beaters and the tiger game for the remainder?"

The Emperor leaned across with some show of interest.

"What is that? Tell it to me."

The girl quickly explained how the game was played with four pawns on one side and a castle, or bishop, on the other. Akbar soon grasped the rules and said he would be the tiger. For three swift games Lamia's beaters drove the tiger into a corner of the chess-board from which he could not move, and so won. Then Lamia became the tiger and broke through the beaters with ease. This intrigued Akbar, who was delighted when she leaned well forward and whispered the knack to him.

Lamia now got up from her cushions and guest followed guest in her place. Some found the knack almost at once, while others never saw it all, and Akbar, pleased as a child with a new toy, insisted upon playing until the entire gathering became bored almost beyond endurance.

Lamia had hobbled to the Maharajah's side on the couch, where she sat close to him and he held her hand tightly.

"Are you pleased, Best Beloved?" she asked quietly.

He nodded and put a finger to his lips because it was unwise to risk disturbing the Emperor. At last, however, Akbar had had enough and got to his feet, and, in an unusually expansive mood, laughed and jested with those he had beaten at the game. Turning his head and seeing Lamia, he went across and taking her hand led her forward a few paces.

"My friends, here is a perfect rosebud of Hindustan," he announced solemnly. "I would have plucked her, but having pricked my fingers on the thorns of her wit and skill she will blossom in another garden." Akbar glanced at the Maharajah. "To you, my Lord of Rajilal, I say, in future wear the gloves of discretion and restraint when handling this flower. Roses need protection from the scorching sun of publicity and watering with thoughtful attention." He dropped Lamia's hand and turned away. "It is finished. You have my permission to go."

The next morning, Lamia was still in bed and asleep when she was awakened by Fatima, Naquib Khan's wife, who came into the tiny bedroom carrying a large parcel wrapped in stiff yellow silk which she put down on the bed.

"Why are you here?" exclaimed the girl, sitting up. "What was that you carried?"

"A messenger came to our house this morning saying that the package was to be given to you. The man did not know you no longer lodged with us," explained the woman. "Your mother suggested that I brought it to you. She much desires to know the contents and from whom they come. It has on it the Imperial seals."

With a cry of pleasure Lamia caught up the heavy parcel and looked at the end secured by great blobs of sealing wax on which were imprinted Akbar's personal seal. She was about to break them when she changed her mind.

"Go, bring me a knife!" she ordered. "I will not destroy them, but cut the silk."

When the knife was produced she slit the silk and with difficulty drew out a sandalwood box richly carved, with a filigree gold lock in which was a small gold key. The two women held their breath as Lamia turned the key and held back the lid. She had guessed what the box contained, but Fatima had no idea. Lying each in its rose-coloured silken bed in a deep tray were the chessmen of the night before. Below the tray was the board, while lying on the pieces was a large note which the girl picked up, opened, and read in Urdu script:

'A gift for the Lady Lamia from a vanquished foe.'

With a dazed expression on her face the girl looked up at Fatima, who was standing with her mouth open and hands clasped to her breast.

"He has given them to me," she said breathlessly. "It is beyond all amazement."

"By the head of the blessed Prophet himself!" cried Fatima, "it is indeed an Imperial gift. Your star rides high in the heavens."

The two women then examined some of the pieces, admiring and pointing out their exquisiteness. News of Fatima's arrival and that something unusual was taking place in Lamia's room soon spread in the harem and in a short time the room was crowded with curious visitors who were loud in their appreciation of the gift. There were shrill cries of astonishment, much excited comment, and a good deal of giggling.

When the Empress Miriam heard of the gift she smiled askew and shook her head.

"It would appear that if this girl remained I should have had a dangerous rival," she said quietly. "Allah be thanked that she soon departs!"

CHAPTER XV

It having been tactfully broken to Lamia that she should now return to Naquib Khan's house, she bathed and dressed, and aided by one of the lady's maids and her crutch she walked back. Her mother received her joyfully and duly admired Akbar's gift, but there followed an air of restraint when she straightened herself and closed the lid of the box.

"Have you considered, my daughter, that in Rajilal you will be in the shade, while here you enjoy the full sunshine? Have you so little ambition?"

The girl laughed and caught her mother's hand.

"I will answer with a question. Have you never greatly loved any man, my mother? You speak of sunshine and shadow. Without my lover I have sat in deep shadow these many weeks."

Ameyra grimaced, and turning away picked up a garment to cover her slight embarrassment.

"He has sent word that arrangements for our return are completed and that we shall leave in the dawn to-morrow."

"No, we will return as we came—alone!" announced Lamia firmly.

Ameyra spun round, bewildered, and saw from her daughter's face that she meant what she said.

"I have considered the matter, and although I long to be with him there are things to be settled before all can be as it was," continued the girl. "Have you forgotten that it was you who told

me I must treat him as a high-spirited horse needing a curb? It is true there is now peace between the princes, but because of his foolishness I have suffered. I have not forgotten that he sulked in Rajigarh and turned away from me. For this there must be atonement, although I have long forgiven. I demand atonement because I have only one life and I will fight so that our love may grow stronger and not weaker with the passing years. Our lord king was wise when he commanded I remain here for six moons, but that I could not have endured."

Ameyra shook her head and failed to understand.

"You are as changeable as a summer breeze," she announced, sighing. "You say you long to be with him and yet turn away from him. You love him and yet spurn him. Here, at court, honours lie before you and you cast them aside. Because of these things I am lost in a wilderness of doubt. Never from one hour to another do I know what you will say or do." Tears welled up in her eyes and she blinked them away. "You are no longer a child, and I am an old woman of no account."

Lamia instantly responded to this, and leaning forward caught her mother's arm and pulled her down on to the couch beside her.

"This is talk utterly without sense," she cried, resting her head on the elder woman's shoulder. "Next to him you are my moon and guiding star, and all the world to me, but he belongs to me and I shall handle him as I consider fit. You shall see, all will be well."

Mollified, Ameyra looked down and ran a hand lovingly over the satin-smooth hair.

"It is true, and I do meddle. Those who tamper with quarrelsome lovers get scratched by both. Tell me what lies in your mind concerning him."

The girl promptly sat upright and smiled a trifle wickedly.

"We will travel alone in the cart as before. In Rajigarh I will remain with you and he shall come begging for me to return to the palace. I will be as sweet as honey, but will demand that the Diwan shall be forgiven and released, and the Maharanee brought back."

"Brought back!" cried Ameyra, amazed. "You would not be his wife and bear him many sons?"

"He and I have no need of priests and marriage feasts, my mother. My love for him is real, and deep, and pure, and I will not have it blemished by dishonour. His wife is a pale lily whose head he would snap off by divorce. She is utterly without fault and if I allowed this thing it would remain always a shadow between us. Unless she so desires, I will never permit it. My heart shall not rule my mind in this thing."

"If you cannot turn him from his purpose, what then?" enquired Ameyra, confounded by this exhibition of commonsense and strength of character.

"That will not be considered. He will do as I wish, of that I am sure."

"You hold him so firmly?"

"Assuredly! He is bound to me with a silken cord more strong than iron chains."

"I pray to the gods it is indeed so. You will handle him gently?"

"Yes, even as a rebellious kid is handled."

"He will be much angered when he knows we travel alone."

Lamia struck out a short length of pink tongue and grimaced charmingly at her mother.

"Always you doubt me. Bring paper and ink and I will write a letter to him."

It was, however, only after several false starts that she composed a letter to her lover.

From Lamia, daughter of the Lady Ameyra, lodging in the house of the Illustrious Naquib Khan, to our Lord of Rajilal, whom we pray to the gods to protect and to send answer to his prayers:

It has been made known to me that my lord desires I journey to Rajigarh in his company. The idea enchants me, but it cannot be.

Our Lord of Rajilal knows I came to Agra on a mission. The gods listened and the mission has been fulfilled. I go to my mother's house where I await my lord's coming.

My love is as the sun, but across its face there pass dark clouds. Doubtless, my lord will call up the winds of reason to blow them away.

I ever pray for my lord's long life and prosperity.

Written by me in the 11th hour of the 9th day of the 5th Moon.

Lamia handed the letter to her mother but she returned it, saying, that because it was written in the new Urdu script she could not read it. The girl then read it aloud and when she came to the end Ameyra shook her head.

"He will not understand and be enraged," she said, shrugging her shoulders.

Ameyra was correct. The Maharajah was upset when he got the letter and at once came to the house demanding to see Lamia. She politely refused and sent a reluctant Ameyra to interview him, who did nothing to soothe the ruffled prince when she told him what her daughter had said concerning the Maharanees.

"He has gone?" asked the girl, looking up as her mother returned hot and flustered.

"Yes, but furious as a wounded tiger. He cursed me most shamefully and behaved like a thwarted child."

Lamia laughed and put an arm around Ameyra's waist.

"Together we will teach him wisdom. At heart he is as a boy, howling when his wants are not immediately forthcoming. We will now consider other things. It has just returned to my mind. Do

you know what has befallen the Prince of Ajanta? I learned of it in the harem, where it is common knowledge."

"No, what has befallen him?" enquired Ameyra eagerly. "It is in my heart to wish him food for jackals."

"The Emperor has displaced him and his uncle's son now holds the state."

"Displaced? This is beyond all expectation!"

"It is said he poisoned his brother and tore out the finger-nails and toe-nails of a dancing boy. There were also other things too unseemly to mention," said Lamia, shuddering. "They say the Emperor behaved as never before, sitting as if lifeless and speaking coldly and without rage."

"Ah ho, this prince would be better dead! Throneless princes are as cobras in a rose bush."

"Our lord king was merciful, my mother."

Ameyra snorted in an unladylike manner.

"Is one so with scorpions? If this prince were to be tipped off his throne why did the Emperor cause him to be at peace with Rajilal? It was not needed."

"They say the Emperor never judges without full proof, my mother. This was not forthcoming until he had considered the matter with his ministers."

"Where now is this stateless prince?"

"They say he left the palace, smouldering with rage. Before going his tongue was loosened and men heard him declare that our lord of Rajilal had spoken poisoned words into the Emperor's ear so that his face was turned away."

"What of the Maharanee?" cried Ameyra in alarm. "Surely he will wreak some vengeance upon her?"

Lamia smiled reassuringly.

"So said the Ranee Jadonji, who sought out the Emperor and he listened, saying he would give orders. What these were is not known."

Ameyra put her hands to her face for a moment and shuddered.

"How many great and grievous things can arise from one small action. The idle, drunken boast at the durbar was as a tiny pebble thrown into a lake and its ripples have yet reached even to the Imperial throne. I sometimes think it would have been more wise to have remained in peace at Ombra." She moved towards the door. "Enough, there will be time, and more time, to talk on these things during our journey. Our gracious host must now be consulted concerning our going."

When Fatima heard of the impending departure of her guests she sighed with relief because her household had been considerably disorganized. Although flattered that princes came and went at the house, she thoroughly disapproved of Lamia's conduct. A beautiful and somewhat mysterious young woman who spent days in the Imperial harem and then accepted costly gifts from the Emperor laid herself

open to grave scandals. Hers was a respectable household and already she had noticed friends looking sideways in her direction and smiling among themselves.

Two days later a large cart waited in the courtyard, where Lamia and her mother were saying farewell to Naquib Khan and his son. There was a prolonged exchange of flowery thanks on one side and depreciations of hospitality on the other. The host turned at last to Lamia and smiled gravely.

"In the days to come, my daughter, when your sons have need of a teacher, remember my son, Kais Khan. He follows in my footsteps."

"Surely he will push wisdom into the Emperor's grandsons?" replied the girl laughing.

The old man shrugged his shoulders.

"If it is Allah's will, it will be so, but those who count upon the favour of princes gamble with fate. The Prince Jehangir having no love for me, how, then, will he favour my son in the years to come?"

Lamia nodded understandingly.

"If the need arises I will remember."

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The journey in the lumbering cart back to Rajigarh did not follow exactly the same route, but it was pleasant and restful after the exciting days at the court. Lamia spent long periods telling her mother the smallest details of life in the harem, and there were a thousand other subjects to discuss as they meandered over the countryside.

One forenoon, as was the custom, the cart was taken off the road into the shade of a large clump of dark trees near a small but prosperous village. The two women were helped down from their seats and Lamia, with the aid of her crutch and her mother's arm, insisted on going for a walk among the trees to stretch her limbs. Slowly they strolled over the springy layers of dead vegetation until at last they came out on the far side of the trees.

A little to their right they saw an aged shrine set close to the tree trunks. It was a very long, low tomb with sides of brick plastered with baked mud and whitewashed. At the head was a tombstone-like erection, also whitewashed, in which were set many tiny alcoves where lay the pathetic remains of long dead flowers, and tiny pottery bowls in which were all kinds of strange offerings. The flat top of the tomb was covered with a layer of smooth pebbles from some river bed, and in the overhanging branches were dozens of strips of cloth and a green flag of Islam.

The women approached the shrine and were examining it when from a shack on a raised platform near the foot an old man appeared. He stared at them in a bemused manner and then spoke in a quavering voice.

"Is it Jatayu you seek?" he enquired. "He sleeps and I would not waken him. Return at dusk."

"Who is Jatayu, old man?" asked Lamia.

"You do not know him?" cried the ancient, shrilly. "You must indeed be strangers in this land."

"Yes, we are travellers from Agra," replied the girl, moving forward.

The man then saw her crutch and pointed at it with a clawlike hand.

"You walk thus and yet do not seek Jatayu. Allah must have guided your steps to this place."

"You speak in riddles!" exclaimed Ameyra impatiently. "Tell us concerning this Jatayu."

The man moved his lips in and out over toothless gums, and grumbled a little to himself before replying.

"He is a healer above all others," he said at last. "Those seeking his aid come from great distances. He takes no payment and men bless his name. He is a saint beyond all doubt."

At that moment a strange apparition appeared in the doorway of the shack and started to crawl out on to the platform. His Isabella-coloured rags hung in festoons from his back and it was obvious he was very old. Halting at the edge of the platform, the creature raised his face and turned his bald head towards the visitors.

"Who comes, Ram Durga?" he asked in surprisingly deep tones. "I heard voices, women's voices!"

Lamia stared at the mass of dark brown wrinkles and seeing the man was blind, a wave of pity surged over her. Leaving her mother's side she sat down on the platform beside the man she guessed was Jatayu.

"My heart melts because you are blind," she said softly. "How sad a fate."

The man started at the nearness of her voice, made as if to crawl away, and then paused uncertainly.

"You are a woman! I, Jatayu, hate all women! What do you want of me?"

"We want nothing, my friend. My mother and I are but travellers resting during the heat of the day. Walking among the trees we came upon this place. Tell me why you hate women. Are we such evil things?"

Jatayu jerked convulsively and turned his sightless eyes towards the girl.

"It is strange that you should use the word evil. She was evil and because of her I became blind." The man then wriggled into a sitting position and put out a hand. "Let me examine you, that I may discover what manner of woman you may be. You have spoken words of compassion. I would know if they came from the heart or only the lips."

Lamia held out an arm and the man's sensitive fingers glided up it to her shoulders and then across her features, but so light was the touch that she hardly felt it. Ameyra stared disapprovingly as she leaned against a tree trunk. Jatayu then spoke his thoughts aloud.

"You are young and beautiful even as she was, but you are free from foul thoughts and deeds. Because of this I will aid you. Tell me what has befallen." The ancient turned his head and addressed the other man. "Are we alone, Ram Durga?" he called. "I would not have it known that I heal women."

"We are alone except for the girl's mother who stands nearby," replied the man. "Be swift or they may come from the village."

"Good! Now, my daughter, speak."

"Nothing ails me, old man," answered Lamia. "It is true I fell and broke the small bone in my leg, but that is nearly mended and soon I shall walk as before."

"Ah hi, a bone! That is good! Had it been a sickness of the flesh or the blood I could have done nothing. Wounds and bones, these I can heal and mend. Permit me to feel the leg."

Lamia lifted her leg and Jatayu ran his fingers down the flesh between the supporting splints. Nodding his head and mumbling to himself he got down on to all fours and crawled into the shack. In a few moments he reappeared carrying a small leather bag like an apple. Taking up his sitting position he untied the thong about the neck of the bag and produced a smooth piece of substance the size and shape of a fat, shelled almond. It lay in his palm and the girl stared at it. The stone, if it were one, was a curious pink in colour with a patina of thin white veins all crinkled and curved and which, to Lamia's surprise, seemed to surge and heave as she looked at them.

Taking the object between his fingers, Jatayu rubbed one end gently but firmly up and down the girl's leg, and she started and nearly cried out because its touch resembled that of hot metal.

"Be still!" ordered the old man. "There will be no harm! To-morrow, at this hour, the supports may be removed and you can walk as before. Take care for some days, because newly-knit bones lack their full strength."

"To-morrow!" cried Lamia incredulously. "They told me it would be another moon before they could be cast aside. Is he not a healer above all, my mother?"

"Yes, he is a great healer," answered Ameyra, who had witnessed too many strange things in her life to doubt Jatayu's words. Leaving the tree she went across and sat down on the other side of the man. "What is that you use?" she asked. "Never before have I beheld the like."

The man hastily replaced the object in his bag before answering. "It came from the head of my wife, she who blinded me."

Both women cried out in astonishment and demanded to be told

the story. Jatayu hesitated until Ram Durga, who was squatting on his haunches nearby, urged the man to tell the story again.

"Because you ask it, Ram Durga, I will tell it, but first bring me water and opium pills to loosen my tongue which becomes clogged with age."

When this was done, and after a pause of several minutes, Jatayu began his narrative.

"When I reached the age of twelve years my father and mother both died of the *mata* (small-pox) and I was left alone in a village near the great city of Lahore among the hairy men of the North. Then came my father's second cousin, who was a pastry-cook and a seller of cooked foods living near the Amber Gate in Jaipur City. When all things had been put in order I went with him to Jaipur and also became a cook—I, who would have been a soldier like my father.

"My father's second cousin was a fat and kindly man, but his wife hated me, daily forcing me to eat dirt and abuse. I was ever quick to rage, and one day, when I was eighteen years of age, and strong and full of life, the wife accused me of theft and I struck her so that she fell to the ground and lost her senses. Her husband and I raged together and he called me many evil names. In the night I stole his money and went away, coming at last to the city of Jodhpur. Knowing no other trade I sought to earn my food as a pastry-cook, but in the city there were many such, and those with whom I spoke laughed, saying there were as many cooks in the city as lice in a Persian's coat.

"I made a little money by wrestling and swinging the clubs, but my belly grew slack as that of a starved cow. One hot afternoon I followed the Maharajah's court out on the road to the Balasamund Gardens, where it went each day because there it was cool and pleasant after the heat in the city. There was a great gathering, and when it came to the gates many sat by the roadside. It then came to my mind that beside the gates would be a fitting place to ply my trade.

"This was a wise thing to have done, because many of those who had walked from the city were glad to see my booth and crowded about me, so that I was well satisfied. I then built a small house with a courtyard and a great oven, and the gods favoured me.

"At night, when the court had returned to the city or was lying in the pavilion on the bund, those who tended the gardens came to my house and we smoked and talked of many things. Because of this they permitted me to walk in the gardens, and my heart rejoiced because they were very lovely. At noonday, when the city is as hot as a cook's oven, these gardens were as cool as a mountain stream. The great trees grew close overhead, and the breeze across the waters of the lake was as fragrant as the hair of a beloved.

"It was my custom to walk mainly on a certain path, it being

lined with many scented bushes, and some were covered with jasmine; it also led to the cages of the tigers, who hated me, roaring mightily when I drew near. At this time it came to my mind that I should take another wife. I was married early, but she also had died of the *mata*.

"Those who tended the gardens told me that the court would not come to the gardens for many days because the Maharajah had gone on a visit to another state. That evening I walked there at sunset and climbed even the steps on to the great bund which holds the waters of the lake. My heart was soft and my mind merry because of the great beauty of that place. Across the still and coloured water I could see the yellow dust rising from cattle as they were herded for the night, and parrots screeched overhead like wives raging together. I can still see these things as though they were as yesterday.

"It grew late and I went down the steps into the garden, and as I walked in the dim light a woman appeared before me. From whence she came I know not. Unveiled, her face was so lovely that I all but lost my senses. She came close and gazed in silence into my eyes and the fragrance of her presence turned my heart to water and my knees bent under me. Even to this day I do not know how it befell, but without speech she went with me to my house and I lived for many days as one who dreams.

"I took this woman to wife because she had ensnared me as a leopard is caught in the net. Never was such a wife. Virtuous and most modest, never leaving the courtyard except that she was fully veiled. She spoke little and when I enquired, as I often did, whence she came, she would smile very sweetly and shake her head. One thing troubled me. She was always as cold to the touch as a pebble in the stream that ran before the house on the far side of the road, and when she aided me with the preparation of the foods and pastries and threw fuel into the great oven she never grew hot and perspired as I did.

"So skilled did she become at fashioning new foods and sweetmeats that my fame spread, even those of the court itself sending their servants to my house. I was indeed eaten up with pride when it came to my ears that the Maharajah himself made inquiry as to who had fashioned certain sweetmeats.

"In those days I was very happy. Except for sons, what more does a man want than a beautiful, industrious, and virtuous wife, and a trade that brings him substance and honour?"

Both Lamia and her mother heartily agreed as the old man paused and drank some water before continuing his story.

"Listen carefully, my friends," continued Jatayu, "and you shall hear how the gods, who had grown jealous, brought about my downfall. They even used one of their own priests to cause my ruin.

"One night an aged Jain priest, who was very wise, came to

talk and refresh himself with me, as was his habit each time he passed that way. It was growing late and we sat on a *charpoy* beside the road and the moon rose slowly in the dark sky. Ahi, that night is to me as but yesterday!

"My beautiful wife, thinking I was alone, because there had been no speech for some time, came out of the courtyard and her veil was lowered. When she saw the Jain she gave a great cry and ran back into the courtyard, closing the door with much noise. I smiled and was about to praise her modesty when I looked at the priest, and his face chilled my heart. His eyes were ever fierce, but now they seemed as those of the tigers in the cages.

" 'Who is that woman?' he asked in a low voice so terrible that I shuddered as if stricken by fever.

"I told him that she was my wife. He then asked me many questions concerning her and my tongue became clogged and I was unable to give answer. At last he sighed deeply and passed his hands across his face.

" 'My son, how accursed of the gods are you,' he said wearily. 'You know it not, but you are wedded to a snake woman.'

"It was then I made protest.

" 'My father, I care not what she is,' I said. 'She is a good and virtuous wife, and I am happy, even though we have not yet a son.'

" 'What of your life and your soul? Have you no regard for them? Surely you will sink to Hell. You must do as I bid you, and you will see that I do not speak empty words. In the evening, make a salt curry and cause this woman to eat it. That night, when you lie beside her on the bed, do not sleep but watch, and may the gods preserve you.'

"He rose up from the *charpoy*, put on his slippers, and left me, and I was rent with anguish. For many days I fought against the temptation and often cursed the name of this priest who had disturbed my spirit. I then did as he had bid me do. Craftily, I fashioned the salt curry, and my beautiful wife with but little comment ate it. That night I lay down beside her and there was a full moon. She slept like a little child and I watched her face as one will do with a sick child.

"The night drew on and my eyes were heavy with sleep when she stirred. Then my limbs became as rigid as a tree, and my heart as cold as the northern snows. Slowly she sat up, and by the moonlight flooding the open door I saw that she still slept. Her mouth became wide open and slowly, very slowly, there came out of it a great snake. Coil by coil it emerged, and it glowed like sunshine seen through amber. Its head turned from side to side; its forked tongue darted in and out; and in its black eyes was death. Even as I tell this once again I live through the agony of those moments. Across the bed, down on to the floor, and out of the doorway it went, and I could hear the great scales slithering across

the beaten earth. From beyond the road came sounds as it drank thirstily from the stream.

"As a man who is dead and yet still alive I waited for its return. Coil by coil it entered her mouth, she sighed deeply, and lay back, and continued to sleep. It was then something broke in my head and I lay considering how I could rid myself of this evil thing that was my wife. With the dawn came a great thunderstorm. It was laughter from the gods.

"Cunning as the snake that lay within her I made a plan. A great baking was arranged and the fire in the oven glowed like a jewel. My beautiful wife smiled at me as she bent down to add yet more fuel. It was then I thrust her into the oven and closed and barred the door. As I did the deed my senses returned to me and with tears and loud cries I broke open the door to drag out my wife from the fire. My bones melted with fear because she was not there. Instead, lying coiled in the white heart of the fire, was the snake. Before I could slam the door it raised its head and spat at me. The venom entered by eyes and I became blind.

"There is little else. When those who wished to buy my wares did not find me they came into the house and saw me senseless before the oven. When I had recovered and told them the story they mocked me, saying I had slain my wife and hidden her body. One then searched among the cooling ashes of the fire and brought out that which lies in the bag. When men saw it they ran away in fear and my house became accursed."

"It is a story strange beyond belief," said Lamia. "My heart has become cold because of its sadness. What then befell?"

"Without sight a man might be at the bottom of a well, my daughter. Leaving my house I went out into the countryside, taking nothing but that which had been found among the ashes. Men were compassionate because of my affliction.

"Many moons passed, and then in a dream my wife came to me again saying that I held the power of healing; but I did not believe. One day, in a village, a screaming child drew near. I called to it and it came, and I learned it had cut its tiny hand. Remembering the dream I drew out the thing that had lain in my wife's head and placed it on the wound. Within the hour it was healed and no mark remained. In such a manner I became what I am." Jatayu coughed, spat, and waved a hand. "I am now weary with much talk. Pray depart so that I may rest."

The two women got to their feet, and Ameyra was about to help her daughter when she paused uncertainly.

"Old man, I have a small boil on my arm," she said. "It pains me. Can you remove it?"

"Woman I do not deal with such things," snapped Jatayu. "Eat less and purge yourself."

Lamia giggled and Ameyra frowned as they moved away after the girl had warmly thanked the old man.

With complete faith in Jatayu's cure, Lamia removed her splints the following day and found that, except for a little stiffness, she could walk in comfort.

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN Ameyra and Lamia arrived back at the house on the hill in Rajigarh they were joyfully received by the household. Ermi, the old maidservant, wept and ran round in small circles as the two women got down from the cart.

"Come quickly and look upon the surprise that awaits you!" she cried shrilly. She then saw that Lamia was walking normally. "By all the great gods, what is this marvel?" she asked, holding her breasts.

The girl explained as she hugged the old woman, who quickly broke away.

"Ah hi, would that he were here! Perhaps he might put some life into these old bones of mine."

Refusing to explain the surprise, Ermi trotted off and mother and daughter exchanged smiles as they followed. In one of the smaller reception rooms the old woman stood aside and disclosed the fact that several tables and a couch were littered with parcels, packages, rolls, and boxes of all shapes and sizes.

"What are these?" enquired Ameyra, entering and looking down at the nearest table.

"Are they for me? From where did they come?" exclaimed Lamia excitedly as she fingered a fat roll of pale green silk.

"From the palace!" cried Ermi, delighted with the results of her surprise. "Many rude and haughty men brought them by night."

The gifts were then examined and revealed an extraordinary collection of articles ranging from toilet sets and saris to seven rugs and two cages of singing birds. Suddenly Lamia straightened herself and laughed. Turning to her mother she continued to laugh a little hysterically.

"Why are you behaving thus?" asked Ameyra, frowning. "I can find no humour."

"He has sent these things for me, my mother. Do you not understand? Having heard of the Emperor's gift he is jealous."

"Ah ho, it is true!" agreed her mother, smiling. "All men are alike, and jealousy is a sharp spur to a laggardly lover. What will you do?"

"Nothing! They shall be put away and when the time arrives I will thank him very prettily."

Ameyra made a small grimace and, shrugging her shoulders, she left the room. What her daughter did with the gifts was her own

concern and she, Ameyra, was eager to make a tour of inspection of the household. As was to be expected there were several things that did not meet with her approval. A servant was scolded for allowing hens to wander in the inner courtyard; a gardener was called upon to explain why a precious bed of melons was looking half dead; and, finally, the ancient gatekeeper was roundly cursed for not keeping his cubby-hole beside the main gate neat and swept.

Towards sunset Lamia went up on to the roof and sat down in one of the swinging chairs. The heat was abating and it was pleasant to sit alone with her thoughts, also it was restful to be quite still again. The long journey in the cart had been pleasant, but the continual bumping and jerking of the solid wheels had always been present.

Before sitting down she had caught a glimpse of the high palace walls through the tree-tops and wondered what her lover was doing. Had he learned of their return and what was he thinking? Did he long to be with her? Perhaps he was already on his way to the house. She suddenly experienced a spasm of doubt. Was she wise in behaving towards him as she was doing? She had told her mother that his love was as strong as her own, but was this certain? Someone had once told her that between lovers one always gave more than the other. If this were so, should she be giving instead of demanding? What was she demanding? Surely it was proof that he loved her deeply? If this were the case then she must have doubts concerning him? No, she was muddling cause with effect, but the reflection brought her to her feet to walk slowly up and down the flat mud roof. She must keep the main theme always before her, and it was that he must never be sure of her.

Not long afterwards on hearing a commotion in the main courtyard she moved across to the balustrade and looked down. Her lover had arrived and her heart began to beat faster as she watched him speak to her mother, who had hurried out to greet him. Her resolutions began to slip, but she clung desperately to them. A few minutes passed before she saw his head and shoulders coming up the outside staircase. How slim and handsome he looked in his long tight white coat, gold belt, and pale blue pugri. The girl caught her breath and put a hand over her heart as if to slow down its fluttering: if he came now and embraced her she knew she would utterly give way and agree to anything as she lay in his arms. The Maharajah, however, did not do this. Glancing about as he reached the roof-top, he saw Lamia, paused, and then came slowly towards her. Instantly she was overwhelmed with a bout of acute shyness, and after a swift glance at his eager face she lowered her head and half-turned away. Her lover misunderstood the action and his smile grew fixed.

"Greetings, my lord," she said in a small voice as he halted close beside her. "I am honoured a hundred times that you should come thus to visit me."

This was not at all what the Maharajah had imagined their meeting would be, and chilled by her aloofness he discarded a carefully prepared speech.

"I hope your health is of the best and that you are not unduly fatigued by your journey alone," he said, and laid stress on the word 'alone.'

"Yes, my health is of the best, my lord. The journey with my gracious mother had strange results." Lamia lifted her leg slightly. "An ancient healer met by the wayside mended the damage so that I can now walk as before."

"That is news worth a ransom!" cried the Maharajah sincerely. "How was the cure effected?"

The girl briefly told of the meeting with Jatayu, and while doing so most of her self-control returned. They then continued to make conversation in a stilted manner until at last her lover grinned.

"We are like two swordsmen seeking an opening," he said, and tried to take the girl in his arms. "Without you there is no sun."

Lamia, however, adroitly slipped away and indicated the chairs. Refusing to sit down the Maharajah scowled with mock severity.

"Why are you being so unkind to me, Beloved?" he demanded. "Is it that you no longer love me?"

Lamia prevaricated while wondering how she was going to say all that she wished to do.

"It is unseemly to make love on the house-top for all the world to see," she replied demurely.

She then sat down on the broad balustrade and her companion raised one foot on to it and rested an elbow on his knee.

"You have given me no answer."

"My lord doubts my love?" remarked the girl, turning her head and smiling as she looked up.

"You avoided me when I would have taken you in my arms and whispered of my love."

"You forget easily. It is still in my mind that, when I would have reasoned with you, you turned from me. Knowing this you upbraid me for so doing. Because of your foolishness I have been shamed, wounded, and spurned. Not one word of compassion concerning this has come from your lips."

Her lover protested vehemently, but the girl stopped him.

"It is true that you are the Prince of Rajilal and I am of no account, but in the matter of love there is no rank, no high value upon dignity. Two lovers are akin to all men. Does our love differ then from that of the outcast, or the peasant? You are a man and I a woman, and yet princely vanity keeps us apart. It was little I asked of you, the gods know."

"You would have had me demean myself to an enemy."

"And you would have given men's lives to wipe away fancied dishonour. Were you, my lord, entirely without fault at the durbar?"

"No."

"Then who shall judge whose fault was the greater, yours or his?"

The Maharajah wriggled uncomfortably.

"That is finished. What will you have me do?" he enquired, grinning faintly.

"Release and forgive your diwan," answered Lamia instantly.

"He is already free."

"My heart rejoices at this news, but one thing remains. What of your wife, the Maharanee?"

Her lover's face clouded and he compressed his lips.

"I will not recall her."

"Why, my lord? Has she also blackened your face?"

"No."

"I do not understand. You would dishonour her without cause, you who hold honour so high. I am but a simple woman whose mind cannot pierce this mystery."

"It is because I would make you my queen. This is known to you."

"Indeed it is known to me. Did I not say this in my letter at Agra?" Lamia started to her feet and stared down into her lover's face. "You do me little honour. Is our love so weak a thing that it must be held on its feet by priests and feastings? I suspect you are drugged with passion and will cast me aside, as you would do with her."

The Maharajah jumped to his feet and would have caught the girl in his arms, but she held him off with an imperious gesture.

"My name means 'She who walks skilfully,' my lord. Having learned to walk upon the tight-rope I know it for a narrow path. It would seem that our love resembles that path. I would make it broad and pleasant so that I do not have to walk delicately, fearing to fall from it."

"You speak in riddles," replied her companion impatiently. "You still doubt my great love when I would make you my queen."

Lamia stamped her foot.

"We talk in circles, my lord. It would seem that queens are shed as easily as dancing girls. I am led to wonder what would have befallen had all been as it was. Then, there was no mention of my being your queen."

"She cannot be recalled."

"Why?"

"Because it is known that I shall divorce her. Did I gainsay this men would declare that I was woman-ridden, not knowing from hour to hour which road to take."

"Always it is your feelings, your honour, your dignity, that you consider, my lord. What of me? It would be said that I brought about this thing. It shall not be whispered that I trod

her into the dust to further my ambition." Tears stood in Lamia's eyes as she twisted her fingers together. "We face each other across a wall. My love lies bleeding like a wound bathed with salted water. Go! It is finished."

With her chin held bravely high the girl glided across the roof towards the staircase. The Maharajah hurried after her and attempted to stop her, but she shook him off. In the courtyard, Ameyra had been waiting impatiently, and when she saw her daughter coming down the steps she went towards her and the girl caught her arm for support. Her lover, who was close behind, halted abruptly, stared at the two women, and then stepping aside he strode out of the courtyard and was gone.

When Ameyra learned what had passed between the lovers she grew angry.

"You have become as stubborn as an evil-tempered camel," she cried. "If you had gone to him and had softened, doubtless he would have done as you wished. Now he will sulk again and much time will be unprofitably lost."

Lamia, distraught, broke away and went to her room, leaving her mother to go up on to the roof, where she paced up and down. She entirely failed to see her daughter's strange point of view, but it was clear that if the Maharajah could not handle the girl, then she herself was helpless and must allow matters to take their own course. It was all very upsetting, and once again she wished she had never left her old home at Ombra.

Ameyra had just decided to go down to her room and try to sleep when she had an idea. Yes, there was a chance that it might work and was worth attempting. Going to one of the living rooms she wrote a letter, sealed it and despatched it by the gatekeeper.

The next day was a trying one. Lamia, in the depths of depression, insisted that they left Rajigarh at once and went back to Ombra. Her mother first pointed out that they had nowhere to live in Ombra, the old house having been sold, and then, using all her tact and patience, suggested that the Maharajah might even yet give way and it was unwise to do anything drastic without full consideration. Later in the morning, Ameyra received an answer to her letter and it made her more hopeful. Concealing the letter she sought Lamia, who was sitting listlessly in a chair at the far end of the main courtyard.

"I have news from the palace," she announced gravely. "They say he has been overtaken by a fever."

The girl gave no indication that she heard, and her mother repeated her words. Lamia still paid no attention and appeared to be sunk in lethargy, and so Ameyra hurried away and sent off another letter, with the result that later in the day Papeeta came to the house where she had an animated conversation with Ameyra. She was then directed to the roof, where Lamia had gone after refusing to eat or drink.

"I will soon rouse her," announced Papeeta confidently. "Leave us alone and within the hour she will return with me to the palace."

When Lamia glanced up and saw her friend standing beside her she gave a little cry of pleasure, and getting up, the girls embraced warmly.

"When I heard of your return my heart sang a glad song," exclaimed Papeeta. "Time, since you left, has lagged like a lame donkey, but it would seem that you are not glad to be with us again because your gracious mother says your mood is a black one and that you will not eat."

Lamia nodded and the animation died out of her face.

"Yes, I am sorely stricken. My day has become night and I wish I were dead."

"Oh ho, such woe, such despair; it sits ill upon you! Tell me the cause. Is it not truly said that a sorrow shared is a sorrow lightened?" The girl put an arm about her friend and drew her down on to the balustrade. "What is this we hear in the zenana of the happenings in Agra?" she continued. "It is even whispered that you beat the Emperor himself, and called him bad names. When I heard I would not believe."

Lamia snuggled up to her companion and smiled wanly.

"It is true, but the soreness of my heart clogs my tongue and I cannot speak of it."

Papeeta understandingly did not press the subject, but turned to another.

"There has been much trouble in the palace and the zenana buzzes like an angry bees' nest. The Ranee has been in an evil mood and has flayed our lord with her tongue. She will not leave him alone but seeks him out at all hours and they rage together. She returns from his apartments heavy with fury and her tongue is loosened so that we know all that befell." Papeeta giggled before continuing. "It would seem that you and she are of one mind concerning the Maharanee, and she has said many sweet and charming things concerning you. Therein partly lies the reason for my coming. Our lord is now sick and it is said he has taken a fever, but it is in my mind it is a fever of the mind and the spirit."

Lamia nodded but did not speak.

"The Ranee desires to talk with you. Will you come with me? It were wiser to have her heart soft towards you. If you now deny her she may turn her face away and then your path would be ever strewn with stones of offence."

There followed a long pause until at last Lamia got to her feet.

"I will go to her. Together we may find some plan, but I have little hope."

Papeeta clapped her hands with delight, and catching Lamia's arm, she chatted gaily as they crossed the roof towards the stairs.

An hour later Lamia was ushered into the Ranee Jadonji's

sitting-room, a large, stuffy apartment dimly lighted, and heavy with tobacco smoke. The old lady was sitting on a pile of cushions in one corner puffing away at her water pipe which she pushed aside as the girl approached and greeted her with low bows and fluttering hands.

"You have come to us, Chit," she said not unkindly. "Sit beside me. I would hear all that has passed between you and that shameless son of mine."

"He loves me no more, O Queen," said Lamia sadly as she sat down well away from the fierce old lady. "It is ended and I am as a dead tree."

"Ah ho, the despondency of the young is so deep it has no bottom. You are as a young tree bent by the winds of doubt. They will pass and you will be as before. Tell me what has befallen."

Slowly at first, and then with greater ease, the girl told of what had occurred since she had refused to accompany her lover on the return journey from Agra. The old lady listened attentively, nodding and occasionally asking a searching question. When Lamia broke off the Ranee smiled, and leaning forward caught one of the girl's hands in her own.

"We think alike, my daughter, and for one so young you are wise far beyond your years. I would indeed wish that you were my child, because you have the makings of greatness."

Lamia bowed her head and blushed deeply.

"Your gracious words cause me to swoon, O Queen," she said softly. "I am not worthy. I care not for greatness and have no ambition above my love. Without his love there is no salt, no joy, no light in my life, and yet were he to divorce his wife it would be a worm eating at the core of our love."

The Ranee nodded vigorously.

"True, true! Listen! I have news which will lighten your heart. Before departing from Fatehpur Sikri I had audience with the Emperor concerning my son's wife. He listened to my pleadings and said he would give orders. What these would be he did not say, but it is in my mind he has sent commands that our daughter-in-law shall be returned here. It is known to you that Rao Chandra no longer sits upon the throne of Ajanta?"

"Yes, this thing is known to me, O Queen."

"Good! We must have patience and hope, and when she returns our son must receive her. Thus will he be turned from his purpose."

"If he refused her admittance, what then, O Queen?"

The old lady chuckled hoarsely.

"That will not be. I shall be forewarned of her approach and she shall be wafted secretly into the zenana. If my son would then still be rid of her—I, his mother, will rise up, because I still have some power in this palace." The Ranee waved a hand. "Go to him, child. They say he has a fever, but it is in my mind that

he feigns a sickness to avoid my just scoldings. Do not speak of his wife, but concern yourself with the fever."

Lamia, who was now feeling a good deal more hopeful, smiled as she hastily got to her feet.

"I will go to him, O Queen, because you so desire it, but I pray that afterwards I may return to my mother until the future is made clear."

"Yes, it will be better so." The old lady wiped her mouth and paused as she looked up. "Have done with this queen, queen. I have borne sons but no daughters, and I would have you name me mother. Now go, and hasten," she added briskly. "Send word by that bold hussy, Papeeta, concerning his true condition."

When Lamia was eventually shown into her lover's bedroom she found him lying on a wide, low couch, naked to the waist and wearing a form of silk sarong. As she went to him he turned his head slowly on the cushions and stared at her with soulful eyes, and then groaned faintly.

"You have come to me, Heart of Hearts," he said wearily. "I burn and my head is heavy with pain."

Wearing an anxious frown the girl knelt down beside the couch.

"Best Beloved, my heart is cold with fear," she cried. "Have they given you draughts and purges?"

Her lover shook his head.

"I am beyond caring, and hope I shall die," he replied mournfully, although watching carefully to see the effect of his words upon the girl.

"Speak not so, My Life," implored Lamia, who was now frightened. "Where is the pain? Doubtless it is but a seasonal fever."

"No!" The Maharajah shook his head. "I waste away. You no longer love me. I will die and you shall gather up my ashes from the pyre."

Normally, Lamia would have smiled at this exhibition of adolescent self pity, but she now took him seriously. He looked so boyish and helpless, and motherly instincts surged up in her. Taking one of his hands she held it, while with the other free hand she leaned forward to smooth what she expected would be a hot, dry forehead. It was, however, neither hot nor dry, but cool and normal to the touch. She gave a little gasp of surprise and then swiftly felt the skin under his chin, and here again there was no sign of high temperature. She got to her feet, flushed with indignation.

"O Base Deceiver!" she cried, breathing fast. "You have no fever and do but feign sickness. Indeed your mother spoke truly."

The Maharajah sat upright, a comical look of consternation on his face.

"What did she say?" he demanded anxiously. "Had I known of your going to her I would have prevented it."

"Such behaviour is unfitting in a prince and a grown man,"

she announced, ignoring his question and stepping backwards. "You would have turned me from my purpose by a trick, a trick savouring of boyish devilry."

He made a grimace and suddenly leaning forward he caught her arms and pulled her down on to the couch beside him.

"My pearl, let us cease this wrangling," he whispered pleadingly. "It shall be as you desire. She shall return and all will be as before."

Lamia started and twisted her head to look into his eyes and see if he were speaking the truth.

"I do not jest," he said laughing. "Are you now satisfied?"

Between laughing and crying Lamia said nothing, but lay back in his arms.

Her visit to the Maharajah became so prolonged that those waiting for her to leave became anxious. One of these was Bag Ram, who had been made a personal attendant to the ruler as a reward for refusing to hand over Lamia to Rao Chandra at the durbar. Greatly daring, he crept down the short passage and peeped behind the curtain hanging before the door of the bedroom. What he saw caused him to retreat hurriedly to where Papeeta was waiting. On seeing his face she took him by the arm.

"What did you see?" she enquired sharply.

"She lies in his arms as if on the marriage bed," gasped Bag Ram.

"You lie," hissed the girl. "He is sick with a fever."

Bag Ram shrugged his slim shoulders and grinned impudently.

"If you do not believe, spy upon them yourself."

Realizing that he must be speaking the truth, Papeeta thought quickly and decided that the Ranee Jadonji should be told of this fresh situation. When the Ranee grasped what was happening she was about to go to bed. Thrusting the girl aside she snatched up a covering and, muttering angrily to herself, trotted off to her son's bedroom. Wrenching aside the curtain she hurried into the room. Lamia saw her first, and with a cry of distress wriggled out of her lover's arms and sat up. He promptly followed suit and the pair stared at the figure of wrath that was bearing down upon them.

"O Worthlessness, you have deceived me. O my Calamity! O Commodity upon which money is Lost! Fool that I was to trust such as you." The old lady shook her fists towards the girl. "All is clear to me beyond doubt. Seeing him thus you have weakened." She turned upon the Maharajah. "It was known to me that you were not sick, but feigned a fever so that she should come to you. Utterly shameless to receive a girl when so unclad. It was a trick to gain your own desires."

The Ranee paused for breath and her son, furiously indignant at her words, slipped off the couch and faced his mother, but she had recovered and began a flood of abuse and recriminations that

was difficult to stem. Without warning the Maharajah sneezed; he sneezed violently five times, and this had an immediate effect on the old lady, because it was impossible to continue to scold him in such a condition.

Lamia now made use of the diversion.

"O my mother, all is well," she cried hurriedly. "It is not as you say. He has agreed for her to return, and I am happy beyond all measure."

The Ranee gaped and glared at her son suspiciously, but he nodded as he stifled yet another sneeze. Reacting immediately, the old lady dashed forward and embraced him warmly.

"My son, my son, I was hasty and spoke without consideration," she cooed. "This has lifted a weight from my old heart."

The Maharajah, swift to take advantage of his mother's embarrassment, gently pushed her away.

"You called me evil names," he spluttered. "What of yourself? You came unannounced and without thought for my feelings. What brought you here?"

Somewhat taken aback the old lady hesitated.

"It was said that the Lady Lamia lingered unduly, my son."

"Who proclaimed this thing?"

"The girl, Papeeta."

With a stern face the Maharajah strode to the door, pulled aside the curtain and shouted for the girl.

"She is not here, my lord," answered Bag Ram, advancing down the passage.

"Come here, Rascal!"

The young man obeyed and stood just inside the doorway, where he shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"My illustrious mother says that the girl, Papeeta, went to her. Did she wait with you in the outer rooms?"

"Yes, my lord."

"What was said between you?"

"Little was said, my lord."

"Tell me of it."

"We grew anxious, the hour being a late one," replied Bag Ram with growing alarm.

"Ah ho, then I was spied upon!" howled his master, guessing the truth.

Bag Ram, now panic-stricken, turned to flee, but before he could do so he was pounced upon and dragged back by one of his ears.

"Villain! Who did this thing? Was it you?"

"I did but look for one short moment, my lord. It was to see that all was well with you."

The Maharajah was not angry, but he acted as if he were.

"How afflicted am I," he snarled, again tweaking severely Bag Ram's ear. "I am spied upon by knaves who discuss my affairs with all such. What shall be done with him?"

The Ranee compressed her lips.

"Scum!" she snapped, and left it at that.

Lamia was amused and pleaded once again for the young man.

"Release him, Beloved. He did no great harm, and tumbles into trouble as easily as a frog into a wayside pond."

Her lover let go of the ear and scowled at Bag Ram.

"Because she asks it, and my mood is a fair one, it shall be so, but those who spy upon princes put their hand into a cobra's hole. Go!"

The young man was gone almost before the order was given.

The Maharajah grinned and turned to his mother.

"I pray that you now leave us in peace, my mother. Your bed awaits and if you do not go to it you will lose the freshness of your peach-like bloom. In your going tell them that if I am again disturbed the matter will not be so lightly dealt with."

Before departing the Ranee discussed the Maharanee's return at some length, and then showed concern for her son's health, insisting that at least he had a cold in the head. He denied this.

"Nevertheless all know you have a fever," she said sardonically. "Would you have it whispered that the sickness was feigned?"

The Maharajah saw this point and hesitated, while his mother acted promptly.

"Come, my daughter," she ordered briskly. "We will go and he shall pay for his naughtiness by continuing the sickness."

The girl was gathered up and swept out of the room, leaving her lover to curse women and his mother in particular.

CHAPTER XVII

A WEEK later, when Lamia had been back in her quarters in the palace for some days, a fresh storm blew up between the Maharajah and his mother. This centred round the form of letter to be sent to Ajanta regarding the return of the Maharanee Aman. There having been no news as to what had been done in the matter by the Emperor, the Ranee insisted the letter should be written and despatched at once. Her son, however, made the disagreement over the form the letter was to take an excuse for delay. The old lady, guessing this, called upon Lamia for support, her view being that the letter should at least be a friendly one, whereas her son wished it to be purely formal. When the matter was brought before Lamia, she smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

"It is in my mind that it should be friendly and yet dignified," she announced tactfully. "Rao Chandra no longer being the prince the matter will be simple, but it is strange that there has been no news. I pray no fresh disaster has befallen her."

"If that devil has done her any further mischief the Emperor shall hunt him down and be rid of him as is done with the tiger that raids the village," exploded the Ranee. "Did I not tell the Emperor that a throneless prince was as a snake in a fruit basket."

The Maharajah nodded agreement and turned to Lamia.

"You shall compose the letter, Heart of Hearts," he said, relieved at being able to get someone else to do the task.

The girl glanced across to see what his mother thought of the suggestion, and seeing her nod, said that she would write it.

The next morning the letter was sent off and Lamia sighed with relief. For several days nothing in particular happened. The lovers took up the threads of their lives where they had been dropped after the durbar, and life in the palace became normal again. Even the Diwan, having burnt his fingers, was subdued, at least where his master was concerned.

Summer was now fast approaching with the days growing more and more sultry, and as a result Lamia spent a good deal of her time in the gardens, when she was not dabbling in state affairs. The Ranee approved of this interest and taught the girl much about inter-state intrigue and diplomacy, and the part played in them by women, which was far greater than was known to be the case.

One particularly airless evening Lamia was down by the ponds with Papeeta where they were re-stringing a necklace of small pearls, when the Ranee was seen hurrying towards them from the direction of the palace. Her wrinkled face showed signs of excitement and she held a letter in her hand. The girls put down their work and rose to their feet.

"There is news at last," cried the old lady.

"Of the Maharanee?" cried Lamia.

"Who else, child? This letter arrived within the hour. I show it first to you and then we will take it to my son." She thrust a large, heavy, scented sheet of paper into the girl's hands.

Lamia took it and read it slowly.

The Maharanee Aman, in the palace at Reena in Ajanta, sends humbled greetings to her Best Beloved and Illustrious Mother-in-law, the Ranee Jadonji. She prays that she has returned in safety to Rajigarh and that her health is of the best.

My mother, I have suffered greatly and am weary with much thought and anxiety. By force I was carried away to my brother's palace even as a slave is taken by his master. I am now without honour, and my head lies in the dust.

I have received a gracious letter from our lord, the Emperor, saying that he fears my brother may do me some further mischief. He sent a guard to protect me and bring me back to you. After consideration I have made reply. From the Emperor's letter it was learned that you, and your son, my husband, know all that has befallen.

Rao Mundi Raj is now ruler of our state. He is but a child of

seven, lacking a mother and even sisters. My heart is sad that he has to bear a weight not fitting for his smallness.

News has also come to me that my husband has proclaimed he will divorce me and put another in my place. When first this was known to me my heart became as stone, because, before the gods, I am without blame. I was to him but a wife, and what love he had for me was an unformed fruit never destined to ripen. Had my sons lived I would have appealed against this shame he would pour upon me, but to be as I am is to be forsaken of the gods. The Lady Lamia, against whom I hold no grievance, is more fitting, and I commend her to you.

Because of these things I will not return. Rao Mundi, lacking a mother will find one in me, and in him I shall seek comfort, and perhaps gain some peace of mind. Communicate my desires to him, saying I ever pray for his prosperity and long life. There is much that I would say to you, but it lies in my secret heart and cannot be spoken to him who writes this letter.

Farewell. Do not grieve for me, my mother. If I can comfort the Rao and teach him such wisdom as I possess perhaps I shall not have suffered without some recompense.

I pray that you do not forget me.

Written for the Illustrious Maharanee Aman in the 17th hour of the 20th day of the 5th Moon,

by Ram Dooga, Minister at Reena in the State of Ajanta.

With a strange enigmatical smile on her face Lamia handed back the letter and lifting her chin stared into the sky above the tree-tops.

In a low voice she spoke her thoughts aloud.

"The priest from the East said that nothing we gained in life was free. How dearly I pay for my love. That he and I may be happy this woman must be sacrificed." She turned to the old lady and smiled sadly. "This letter should tear my heart with compassion, but I know it is of little consequence. He will be pleased. Go, take it to him, my mother. I will return to my rooms and be alone with my thoughts."

Lamia hurried back towards the palace, leaving the Ranee to stare after her with a puzzled frown.

The girl was sitting on her balcony in the late afternoon when the Maharajah came to her, and after they had calmly discussed the Maharanee's letter, he tried once more to get her to agree to marry him after he had got the divorce.

"If I bear you a son, O Best Beloved, then we will talk again," she said leaning against him. "In the moons between now and then many things may befall. When I show him to you as he lies in my arms, and if she is still of the same mind, then it shall be as you wish." She turned and smiled wistfully. "Let us go on the lake and cross the water to the shrine where we last held the threads

of our lives as they were. There is some call in me and I must answer it."

Her companion eagerly agreed, and holding hands they went down into the gardens and up on to the bund. Gliding across the gilded water, with only the methodical sounds from the oars to break the stillness, the girl rested her head on his shoulder.

"It is strange, My Life, that when I held and read the letter from your wife a calmness settled on my spirit. All doubts and fears faded like mist before the sun of some hidden understanding. I am happy again; happy as we were when last we made this journey."

Staring down into her animated face, he put an arm about her waist.

"O Supreme Rapture, you are the love of all the ages," he announced gravely. "For you I would grasp the moon and net the stars. You have as many moods as a rose has petals, and I adore them all."

"None can love so deeply as we do," replied Lamia snuggling closer.

Whispering endearments into her ear the Maharajah became lost to all sense of time and place, but as they swept past the spot where the tight-rope walk had taken place the girl's eyes clouded for a moment. Soon afterwards the boat grounded and he helped her ashore, and side by side they strolled up the neglected path to the shrine where, after pushing aside a huge spray of jasmine, they sat down on the narrow seat.

"We will linger here awhile," suggested Lamia. "How sweet and heavy is the perfume, and how beautiful it is in this lonely place. It has the peace of some heaven in which there are only you and I."

Several minutes passed until a thought occurred to the girl and she turned impulsively.

"To-morrow you are to hold a public audience. You will permit me to sit beside you and assist in judgment?"

"Yes, O Moon of Fascination, how can I deny you?"

Lamia looked up quickly into her companion's face.

"You would not have me but that I ask it?"

"That is senseless talk. I shall sip your wisdom as a bee the nectar from a flower."

"Prettily said," laughed the girl, as she turned to a new topic.

"Tell me, My Life, were you jealous of the Emperor in Agra?"

"I was consumed by it as if on fire."

"Truly?"

"I swear it by your ravishing little head."

"I knew it, and did ask only to tease." She broke off and stared as a movement caught her eye. "Look, he is here as before!" she cried in astonishment.

From behind the bushes the old snake-charmer had silently appeared. He still held his basket, but this time he stood erect. The couple stared at him in silence.

"You come again to this spot," began the man in loud, firm tones as he looked at Lamia with dark, steady eyes not unlike those of his snakes. "For the third time I warn you. He from the South has not passed away. Beware of him, O Queen. The threads of destiny are strong, and as is known to you, once I strove to guide their course, but without avail. Again I say beware of this dog, this son of Hell, who would destroy you. He is as a wounded buffalo, maddened by a thirst for vengeance. I called, you came, I have spoken. Farewell."

The man spun round with surprising agility and vanished behind the bushes, while Lamia sprang to her feet and stood with hands close to her sides.

"It is true. He called to me and I came," she cried. "Shall we never be rid of this throneless prince, and must I always continue to walk in fear of him?" She gave herself a little shake, and turning smiled at her lover who had also got to his feet. "Come, Beloved, we will return. Although his words have not shattered the peace of my spirit, this place no longer pleases me. What will be must be faced, and this we will do side by side."

The Maharajah, who was deeply disturbed by this fresh ill-omened prophecy, nodded agreement. On the return journey across the lake Lamia, sensing his fears, chattered gaily in an attempt to dispel them.

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The next morning at eight o'clock the main courtyard of the palace was a scene of unusual activity. Men and women of all ages and types streamed in through the gateway to be present at the audience. Herding them, cursing them, and jesting with them, were dozens of minor officials who at last managed to get the jostling crowd squatting in a great semi-circle before the durbar hall. Those with cases to be heard were placed well to the fore, while those who had come to listen were kept to the rear. Beyond the coughing, spitting assembly, who always made a holiday of these occasions, the normal life of the palace went on as usual. Officials hurried to and fro, and servants went about their duties, while the guard lounging by the gate, gossiped and exchanged items of news with the latecomers. A few privileged spectators hung over the higher balustrades from where they looked down on the scene with bored indifference.

The crowd suddenly became quiet and tense as the Maharajah was seen coming from the back of the durbar hall. By his side was Lamia, who was unveiled, and this caused the assembly to murmur its surprise. On approaching the low, simple throne, placed before the steps in the central arch, the ruler dropped the girl's hand and sat down. As he did so an official put down a fat cushion on the marble close to the legs of the throne and on the right of it. Lamia thanked the man with a smile and sat down.

Behind, the ministers and officials closed in, with the Diwan standing to the left and slightly behind the throne.

The Maharajah adjusted his close-fitting white tunic, and fingered its tight collar as he glanced about without any particular interest. He had held many such audiences and they generally bored him to a point of acute exasperation, and there seemed no reason why this one should be different from those of the past.

Lamia, sitting half-turned towards her lover, fixed her attention on the crowd which was now silent and watchful. She thought how like a flower-bed they were in their holiday clothes. There was a galaxy of brilliant, hard colour in the shawls, pugris, and saris of blue, red, yellow, and especially magenta. They were mostly of the peasant class, or townsfolk, while those of higher social standing were grouped together on their feet at the horns of the semi-circle.

The Maharajah raised a hand and the proceedings commenced. There came the usual stream of land petitions, pleading for the remission of taxes, several cases of a criminal nature, and four of succession. Two hours passed and the Maharajah was growing tired and increasingly bored when a complicated case of divorce presented itself. Lamia leaned forward with revived interest, because, although she had listened attentively to each case she had made no comment.

During the opening stages of this case Lamia turned and smiled up at the Maharajah, who grinned at her in return. The evidence was now given and it transpired that two children had been betrothed at the ages of two and three, and had been married in due course. The boy was now sixteen and the girl fifteen and they had produced no offspring. The parents of the girl now claimed a divorce because the lad had developed a lung disease which had been discovered to be hereditary, and this fact had been carefully withheld at both ceremonies. The youth's parents contended that, one, the disease was not in fact hereditary, and, two, if it had been the girl's family should have found this out for themselves, especially as they all lived in the same large village. They went on to explain that the girl's parents were merely making this an excuse to claim back the wife's dowry, which had been an unusually large one, because the father was heavily in debt to the local moneylenders. The case had been argued out between local lawyers, but no finding had been reached.

The Maharajah, who has listened patiently to both sides, suddenly leaned forward.

"What lies in your mind concerning this matter?" he enquired of Lamia.

"We have heard much windy talk, my lord," she answered quickly, "but nothing has been spoken by the boy or the girl. To me it would appear a matter to concern them alone."

"True, very true," agreed the Maharajah smiling.

Turning to the two parties, who were glowering at each other, he ordered them to produce the man and wife. This caused agitation because neither was to hand. However, within a few minutes the pair were led forward to stand before the throne. The young man was tall and thin, with a pair of enormous soft, dark eyes, and he was behaving rather like a newly-trapped wild animal as he stood wriggling his toes in his sandals. Beside him was his wife, a small person entirely covered by a heavy purdah cloak. The Maharajah watched them for a moment and then patted Lamia on the shoulder.

"You shall speak to them," he said lightly. "What you say in the matter shall be my command."

Lamia nodded and at once took charge of the situation. She began by ordering both lots of parents and their supporters to move well away. She then beckoned the trembling pair to come close to her.

"Have no fears," she said gently. "We are your friends and are here to aid you." She then addressed the wife. "Remove your cloak so that we may see your face."

This caused a mild sensation because it was contrary to custom, and a direct violation of the strict Hindu rule of purdah. Even the Maharajah made a slight movement as if to check Lamia, but he changed his mind and sat back. Slowly the little wife drew off the stifling cloak and as it fell to the ground she felt for her husband's hand and held it tightly. She was a dainty person, but with no particular claim to good looks, and it was obvious that she had been crying bitterly.

"How are you named?" asked Lamia, smiling encouragingly.

The wife replied, but so softly that no one heard.

"There is no cause for fear," said Lamia quickly. "Speak so that all may hear."

"I am named Kankali," answered the girl, her face puckering up like a child about to wail.

"It is indeed a good name." Lamia turned to the youth. "What of you?"

Swallowing several times, his eyes were fixed in a glassy stare on Lamia's face.

"I am Jambaji," he croaked at last.

"Good! Do you love this Kankali who stands beside you as your wife?"

Jambaji nodded quickly, but did not speak.

"Do you also love him?" enquired Lamia of the girl.

"Yes, O Gracious One, I love him dearly," replied the girl, her face clearing and showing some animation.

"Do you desire this divorce?" Lamia looked from one to the other as she asked the question.

Neither replied, but a look of terror grew on their faces, and they clung together for mutual support. Lamia compressed her

lips and turned sharply to the Maharajah, who was watching with amused interest.

"You see, my lord, the answer is plain for all to see on these children's faces. They fear their parents and dare not oppose their wills," she announced energetically. "I say there shall be no divorce, and they should return to live in peace in their village." She stared meaningly towards the girl's parents. "Further, my lord, it would be wise if inquiry were made from time to time so that spite shall not again attempt to part this man and wife."

The Maharajah clapped his hands with delight at this finding.

"It shall be as you say. The judgment is a wise one and worthy of a learned Brahmin."

The parties were being hustled aside by an official when Lamia beckoned to Ram Bahu, who was standing nearby. As he bent down she whispered to him ordering that the girl and her husband should be brought to her later in the day when she would talk to them alone.

A pause in the proceedings followed and the Maharajah was about to declare the audience at an end when a heavily-built man wearing a dull red, loosely wound pugri scrambled to his feet from one of the back rows of the assembly. Dressed unobtrusively in dun-coloured cotton clothes he moved forward with lowered head, hunched shoulders, and arms crossed low down over his chest. Coming closer to the throne than was permitted, an official told him to halt, and he did so at the foot of the five shallow steps. A chamberlain would have dragged the man back to his proper position, but the Maharajah waved him away.

"What do you want with us?" he asked crossly.

Lamia, who was still thinking of the last case, only glanced towards the man, but when he spoke in a low, gruff voice, she started and fixed her attention upon him.

"O Prince of Princes, O Protector of the Poor, I have words for your ear, words heavy with grave news."

"Tell us of their nature."

"My lord, they concern one about whom you spoke poisoned words to the Emperor so that his face was turned away and this man lost all that was his. This prince, who is now no prince, seeks vengeance as the thirsty water in the desert."

Lamia as she listened suddenly experienced a spasm of alarm so acute that it brought her to her feet still holding one end of the cushion upon which she had been sitting. Her lover in the meantime had leaned well forward with a look of intense interest on his face.

"Tell us what you know of this man," he ordered. "Where is he?"

What followed had been carefully planned and took place so swiftly that there could be no intervention from those standing behind the throne. The man jerked up his head, and in spite of

a many days' growth of black beard Lamia instantly recognized him as Rao Chandra. He whipped his right hand from beneath his left armpit and in it was a long, thin dagger.

"Rao Chandra is here," he shouted, and darted forward up the steps to strike the deadly neck blow which reaches the heart through the base of the throat.

Lamia acted instantly. Holding up the cushion as a form of guard she flung herself sideways across her lover's head and shoulders as he continued to lean forward. The blow, already in motion, struck. It pierced the edge of the cushion and sank deeply into the girl's right side. The scene held for a breathless moment. Rao Chandra was then pounced upon by the Diwan and an official, but with a hideous, high-pitched half-scream and half-laugh he tore himself away and dashed blindly into the squatting assembly which promptly closed over him.

Lamia lay across the Maharajah's shoulders and then stood up, the cushion pinned to her side. Turning towards him as he leapt to his feet she spoke quietly.

"Remove this from my side," she said. "It pains me, Beloved."

The Maharajah stared bewildered at the dagger hilt and then gently drew it out and held it up with the cushion still impaled upon the blade. Lamia swayed towards him.

"Hold me or I fall," she cried faintly.

Dropping the dagger, which fell with a clatter on to the marble, he took her gently in his arms. Still dazed, he paused uncertainly and then, picking the girl up into his arms, he moved round the throne. Courtiers and officials scrambled away to make room as he passed slowly to the back of the hall and disappeared. As soon as he had gone, pandemonium broke out and a scene developed that passed description.

Not long afterwards Lamia, lying on her bed in the inner room of her apartments, was being examined by the senior doctor who had been present when she fell from the tight-rope. Near the head of the bed stood the Ranee Jadonji, wringing her hands and with tears trickling down her face, and beside her was Papeeta, so frightened that she could only stare down at the scene with wide, unblinking eyes.

The examination was soon completed. The doctor stood upright, tugged at his scanty beard, and shook his head at the two women before going across to the Maharajah, who was standing looking out across the city as he held on with both hands to a door-post.

"My lord, there is no hope," whispered the doctor. "She bleeds internally."

Slowly, and as in a trance the Maharajah turned, nodded as if he understood, and going to the bed knelt beside it. He was numbed by the disaster and the reaction was not to make itself felt until many hours later.

The girl was lying on her back still conscious as she stared up at the gilded ceiling. Turning her head on the cushions she smiled, and moving a hand she felt for one of his and he took it in both his own.

The Ranee now clutched Papeeta's arm for support and tottering out of the room she was followed by the doctor and the lovers were alone.

An hour later, when Ameyra arrived distraught and breathless in the main courtyard, having run all the way from her house, servants were busily sweeping up and washing away all that remained of Rao Chandra after he had been dealt with by the maddened crowd. Dashing to her daughter's room, with a deadly fear gripping her heart, she lifted the curtain and went inside. The lovers were still in the same position as they had been when first left alone.

A brief glance at Lamia's face told her the truth and Ameyra's knees sagged, and she sank down and buried her face in the bedclothes. Although she gave no sign that she was aware of her mother's presence, Lamia suddenly began to speak, living again in the past. Between long pauses she mentioned childish exploits, and held conversations with her long dead ayah. Several times she referred to her meeting with Father Ridolfo, showing what a deep impression his words had made upon her. Finally, Ameyra broke down completely and wept noisily into the bedclothes, whereupon the girl wearily put out a hand and laid it on her mother's head.

"Why do you weep and behave thus? she asked in tones of surprise. "He loves me and this is no time for tears. The clouds have gone and I am happy again." The girl broke off and turned her head restlessly upon the cushions. "Why am I so weary?" she asked peevishly. "I would go to him in the gardens." She looked for a long time into her lover's face. "You no longer love me," she declared at last. "It is because of this I am so tired; more tired than she who weeps in Ajanta."

Once more she lapsed into silence and the sun was beginning to sink before she spoke again. Her mind was now perfectly clear, and raising her head she stared at the two tired people who watched at the bedside.

"It is finished, my mother," she said gently. "Go and leave him alone with me."

Sobbing bitterly, Ameyra got to her feet, and left the room. Lamia smiled bewitchingly.

"Take me in your arms, O Best Beloved, and carry me out on to the balcony and we will sit as we have so often done before."

His face grey, the Maharajah gathered the girl up in his arms and took her to where the cushions were always waiting on the tiny balcony. Slipping down beside her as she sat with her back resting against the inner wall he put an arm about her shoulders as was his custom. Together they looked out across the green carpet of tree-tops into a distant golden haze.

"Hold me close, My Love," pleaded the girl weakly. "I, who have tried to face all things bravely, am a little afraid to die." She shivered as his hand tightened on the point of her shoulder. "There is so much I would have done and enjoyed, and now I must leave you. My heart is sad that I have not even borne you a son. I have one thing to ask of you. I have not asked many, the gods know. You will grant me this thing?"

Her lover nodded as she looked into his face.

"I am glad, very glad. You shall call her back, going if necessary to her yourself. Say I ask it of her. She will understand."

The Maharajah, being beyond speech, nodded again. A long pause followed until she shivered again and spoke plaintively.

"Heart of Hearts, I have grown cold. The sun has lost its warmth. Hold me close in your arms, it will be easier so."

He did as she wished and she leaned her head against his shoulder like a tired child.

"He called me a daughter of shame, but that is wiped away," she announced, and then gasped and choked a little. "I have trodden a narrow path with you, My Love, and now I face a dark, cold one alone." Her face contracted with a spasm of pain. "Beloved it grows suddenly dark. I cannot see your face," she wailed. "Place your cheek close to mine and whisper you still love me."

When they came to him in the darkness he was still holding her in his arms. Gently they took her from him and led him away.

THE END.

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